DYSTOPIAN THRILLER

WHAT HE SAW

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A Dystopian Thriller

Karen Brady

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Prologue

Fabrication Day

TWO YEARS EARLIER

WE HAVE BEEN WATCHING. WE COME IN PEACE. PREPARE FOR CONTACT.

The messages appeared everywhere in the world simultaneously.

At 04.00 GMT, every digital screen across the planet flickered and then flashed an identical message written in the local dialect. Every location across the globe. Every written language known to humankind.

In London, a mother was breastfeeding her baby when her phone screen went white. The message burned into her retinas, stark and undeniable. She stopped feeding. Her baby wailed, but she could only stare at words that shouldn't exist.

In Tokyo, a trader watched his entire trading floor freeze as every terminal displayed the same message. Trillions of yen in transactions suspended. The markets held their breath.

The message didn't discriminate by nation, ideology, or infrastructure. It appeared on smartphones and smartwatches, on digital billboards and underground railway displays, on hospital monitors and military command screens. Even devices thought to be offline—tablets in airplane mode, computers disconnected from networks—suddenly glowed with the impossible text.

It was the first message, but it wasn’t the last.

The unknown senders followed up swiftly with further communication:

WE MEAN YOU NO HARM, BUT YOU MUST UNIFY. YOUR DIVISION ENDANGERS THE UNIVERSE.

The world's governments mobilised within hours. Emergency broadcasts followed and declarations of martial law were signed in readiness. Contingency

protocols that had existed only in classified documents were activated.

But beneath the official responses, something more primal spread: terror.

A woman in the Russian Space Agency's control room watched telemetry that made no sense. Objects, dozens of them, had appeared in low Earth orbit without any trajectory, without any launch signature, simply manifesting. Each one was approximately the size of a football stadium, perfectly spherical, reflecting light in ways that didn't match any known material.

"This is impossible," her colleague whispered. "How did they get past our defence grid?"

The woman didn't answer because she had no answer. Her hands shook as she tracked the objects' movements—perfectly synchronised, geometrically precise. The objects' orbital patterns suggested intelligence of terrifying sophistication.

It didn't take long before the objects were visible to the naked eye as bright points of light moving against the stars in distinct formation so exact they seemed choreographed. Billions looked up, seeing proof that humanity was no longer alone.

The second wave of messages arrived at dawn, this time with audio. They created harmonics that bypassed conscious thought and spoke directly to something deeper:

YOUR WORLD FACES EXTINCTION. CLIMATE COLLAPSE. NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION. BIOLOGICAL WARFARE. YOU HAVE FIVE YEARS. WE OFFER SALVATION. ACCEPT OUR GUIDANCE. SURRENDER YOUR WEAPONS. UNIFY YOUR GOVERNMENTS. OR PERISH IN DIVISION.

In Washington, the President convened an emergency Security Council. In Beijing, the Chairman activated the People's Liberation Army to full readiness. In Geneva, the UN Secretary-General addressed a General Assembly where ancient enemies sat on screens side by side, united by fear.

The debate lasted three days.

Accept or resist? Submit or fight? Trust the unknown, or cling to sovereignty that might doom the species?

The tipping point came when the objects in orbit began moving towards Earth. Not aggressively—no weapons were fired, no hostile acts detected—but with inexorable purpose towards Earth's surface. Tracking stations calculated the impact

zones: Antarctic Zone, Amazon Basin, Sahara Desert and Central Pacific—all remote regions. The world held its breath.

At the Antarctica landing site, a research team approached the object now resting on ice that hadn't melted despite the heat visibly radiating from its surface. A scientist reached out with a gloved hand to touch the object and felt vibration. Not mechanical, but something else. Something alive.

The object became transparent, revealing an interior complexity that hurt to look at—geometries that shouldn't exist in three-dimensional space and bits of machinery that seemed to coexist, defying all known laws of physics.

And inside, another message:

PROOF. NOW YOU KNOW WE ARE REAL. UNITE UNDER A SINGLE GOVERNMENT. DISMANTLE YOUR WEAPONS. ACCEPT MONITORING. OR WE WITHDRAW AND YOU DIE BY YOUR OWN HAND. MAKE YOUR CHOICE.

The footage went viral within minutes. The object in the Antarctic, with its impossible interior and stark message It was unfiltered and undeniable.

Humanity chose survival.

Global Consolidation began the following week. A treaty drafted in forty-eight hours and presented to every nation as humanity's only path forward. The major powers signed within hours, their leaders appearing alongside top-tier representatives in carefully-staged media ceremonies. Smaller nations followed quickly, although not without theatre.

Weapons programmes were dismantled under alien observation. Borders initially softened, then, months later, were erased completely. The United Nations transformed into the Global State, given authority that superseded all previous national sovereignty.

Of course, military hardliners across several nations threatened defiance. A general with forty years' service gave an interview condemning the "surrender of national defence." He was found dead in his home seventy-two hours later—suicide, the official report said, although his family insisted otherwise. After that, resistance within defence ranks evaporated.

It happened so fast. Too fast for proper debate, for democratic process, for the careful consideration that such massive change required. Many world leaders

resigned in protest, but others—perhaps those who enjoyed the trappings of power too much—found a place within the new Global State.

The objects remained in orbit, watching. Silent guardians or invisible jailers, depending on your perspective. Most people chose to see them as guardians. The alternative was unthinkable.

Compliance with the required edicts moved fast. Digital IDs were no longer voluntary, but were written into law—how else to coordinate a unified species? Biometric tracking chips were implanted in every human hand. Social credit systems were introduced—the price of species survival. Urban spaces were redesigned into 15-minute smart cities, which were more efficient and environmentally friendly, but also easier to lock down. Carbon rationing and dietary mandates were introduced to save the planet. Psychological evaluations became the norm for anyone who questioned the new world order. Slowly, but surely, people's freedoms were eroded—all justified by the existential threat hovering in the skies.

Not everybody was on board with the changes. Around the world, millions took to the streets to show their resistance in protests, riots and even armed rebellions. But the Global State's response was efficient and brutal. Mass detentions. Drone strikes. Citizens disappeared off the street, never to be seen again. Their Psycho-Eval centres could turn even the most hardcore dissidents into model citizens. And then there were those poor souls who were so afraid of the aliens that they committed suicide. It was genocide in all but name. The overt resistance movements lasted all of six months.

Within a year, compliance was nearly universal. The alien orbs remained visible in the sky. They were the constant reminder that humanity lived on borrowed time, that unity wasn't optional, that questioning the Global State was questioning survival itself.

* * *

A Tannoy crackled above the ticket barriers, cutting through the usual noise:

REMINDER, ALL CITIZENS MUST PRESENT FOR BIOMETRIC HAND CHIP BY 18.00. NON-ATTENDANCE WILL RESULT IN AUTOMATIC SUSPENSION OF

DIGITAL WALLETS, HEALTHCARE AND TRAVEL PERMISSIONS.

People knew they had to comply. The queue snaked from the clinic, past the coffee kiosk and halfway up towards London Bridge. Security drones drifted overhead, lenses dilated, tracking every restless shuffle.

"Keep your sleeve up, love," a mother whispered, hauling her son closer. He was maybe nine, school blazer damp at the cuffs, eyes fixed on the metal chair at the front of the line.

"Will it hurt?" he asked quietly.

"Only for a second. Then we can go home. No chip, no dinner." Her voice shook on the last word. She prayed he hadn't noticed.

At the front, a Global State technician in a grey jumpsuit didn't bother to look up. "Left hand on the pad. Palm down. Don't move." A man in a hi-vis vest obeyed. The injector descended with a soft hydraulic hiss. There was a muffled swear, the brief smell of burnt skin, then a green tick on the screen. His phone pinged an instant later: ACCESS RESTORED.

Behind him, a little girl in plaits began to cry. "Mummy, I don't want—"

Two enforcement officers turned at the sound. The mother clamped a hand over her daughter's mouth, eyes darting to the drones. "Please," she whispered into her daughter's hair. "Please just be brave. We can argue at home. Not here."

The line lurched forward. Above them, the Tannoy crackled again, impatient now:

NON-COMPLIANT CITIZENS WILL BE DETAINED FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL EVALUATION.

A man stepped out of the queue, shaking his head, backing away towards the escalators. An officer lifted a wrist, checking something on a small screen. A red icon flashed. "Sir, your presence is required at the fast-track booth," he called, already moving.

The mother stared straight ahead, forcing her son's hand onto the metal rail in front of them. He flinched at the cold and tried to pull back. "We have to eat," she said, more to herself than to him. "We must get you to school tomorrow. Just give them this one thing."

The boy swallowed, jaw clenched, watching the injector rise and fall, rise and fall, as family after family traded a piece of their flesh to stay inside the Global

State system.

The dystopia didn't arrive with tanks and soldiers. It arrived with safety officers and compliance. It arrived with "for your protection". It arrived with applause from most.

And by the time you noticed you're in a cage, the door had already been welded shut.

Chapter 1

A London Morning

2030, THE UNITED NATIONS SUSTAINABILITY AGENDA 80% COMPLETE

Dawn crept through the perpetual smog like a jaundiced eye opening over London—tender in its touch, cruel in what it revealed. Jonnie surfaced from sleep at precisely 06.00, dragged from unconsciousness not by the shriek of an alarm, but by something far more intimate—a gentle electronic pulse that radiated from beneath the skin of his left hand. The sensation was neither painful nor pleasant: a soft throb that quickened his heartbeat and tightened his chest, a biological summons he couldn't ignore.

He lay still for three breaths, staring up at the grey-white ceiling panels. Through the window, the tower blocks of Hackney rose like tombstones in a graveyard for failed optimism, their uniform façades stretching endlessly in the 15-minute smart city ecosystem.

His biometric chip pulsed again, more insistently this time. He threw back the thin blanket and swung his legs over the edge of his regulation, single-size bed. The cold floor tiles caused his calf muscles to spasm, but he was so used to it that he barely noticed.

He took two steps to the right and stood in front of his wardrobe—a generous term for the narrow recess that contained his entire clothing collection. He pulled out his Global State uniform—a thin, carbon-neutral jumpsuit in regulation grey—and dressed quickly. The fabric felt rough against his fingertips and slightly damp from the humidity-control system that never quite worked properly. Everything he wore, everything he touched, everything he ate none of it belonged to him. It was

all rented because endless subscriptions were part of the Global State's mandated circular economy. The arrangement locked him in perpetual debt—a monthly drain that left just enough in his account to survive, but never enough to escape. *The price of stability*, Jonnie told himself.

His stomach tightened with the first stirrings of hunger. He walked five steps to the left of his bed towards the kitchen unit, gleaming with sterile white efficiency against the far wall. Before it would dispense his rationed morning nutrition, it required authentication. He placed his left hand flat against the scanner. The surface was cold, almost painfully so. He felt the faint tingle of the biometric reader probing beneath his skin, interrogating the chip embedded in his hand. The scanner's red light swept across his palm three times, painting bars of crimson across his fingers. The screen flashed white, then resolved into text:

CITIZEN 84773201. CLEARANCE: LEVEL 4.

"Good morning, Jonnie Villin," the automated voice chirped, thin and artificially cheerful, the synthesised warmth more unsettling than outright coldness. "Compliance assessment score: 789 out of 850. Your current carbon consumption allowance is 4.3 units. Today's approved agenda: Data Analyst, Sector 9."

The voice didn't ask if he wanted to know these things; it simply told him. The system didn't just track him; it defined him.

Jonnie was one of the lucky ones: he was protected and cared for by the Global State. He wasn't one of the Blacklisted youths he sometimes glimpsed in the transit corridors—those hollow-eyed ghosts banned from digital life, cast out from the system for refusing a vaccination or speaking carelessly about the Global State and its methods. They haunted the margins of society, sleeping homeless in unapproved zones, begging for food they could never earn. Jonnie was an insider, protected and rewarded for his obedience.

The kitchen unit dispensed his morning nutrition with a mechanical whirr and a soft squelch. The beige slurry oozed into a disposable cup, its texture somewhere between porridge and paste. Jonnie lifted it to his lips and drank quickly. It had no flavour—neither bland, nor unpleasant—simply absent of any taste whatsoever. But it supplied his required calories as calculated by algorithms that knew his body better than he did.

Outside, the low, monotonous hum of drones was omnipresent. Jonnie swore he could hear them through the walls, a persistent buzzing that never quite faded. The drones were part of a sophisticated surveillance network that included facial recognition cameras designed to track anyone the Global State considered an enemy. Twelve billion cameras deployed worldwide—on corners, embedded in streetlamps, inside every shop and office building—all feeding data into the AI-powered grid. Surveillance was woven into the very fabric of the smart city. His zone, like every other, was an open-air prison—easy to lock down and easier still to monitor.

He knew the rules without consciously thinking about them and he had learned to carry their weight without flinching. If he socialised with anyone carrying a low social credit score, his own status would plummet. But the hardest part of compliance was the illusion of choice: the pre-approved options that masqueraded as freedom.

Jonnie desperately wanted coffee—real coffee, the kind that smelled of earth and coated his tongue in bitter richness. But his old cafй with the good beans was in a different zone, which would require a movement permit he didn't have. So he stopped at his apartment block's automated vending hub, a steel alcove in the corridor that hummed with refrigeration, and resigned himself to the synthetic substitute that tasted like burnt chemicals filtered through regret, served in a compostable cup. He placed his hand on the biometric scanner again, feeling the now-familiar tingle.

WELCOME, CITIZEN 84773201. CLEARANCE: LEVEL 4.

The screen illuminated with rows of available purchases, each item accompanied by its carbon cost in glowing green numbers. Jonnie scrolled through the options, his finger leaving faint smudges on the touchscreen. Then he saw it: a small, vacuum-sealed carton labelled "High-Protein Supplement: Beef-Substitute Flakes". A luxury item. Something approaching actual food. It required 0.8 carbon units.

His finger hovered over the selection. His mouth watered at the thought of something with texture and substance. He tapped the screen. The response was instantaneous. The screen flashed violently red, the colour so bright it hurt his eyes. A sound like dry sandpaper dragged across metal shrieked from the speakers:

PURCHASE DENIED. MONTHLY ALLOCATION OF RED MEAT EXCEEDED. MEALWORMS AND CRICKETS AVAILABLE AS SUITABLE PROTEIN ALTERNATIVES.

The suggested alternatives appeared instantly.

"Bullshit," Jonnie cursed under his breath and then pressed his lips tightly together as he realised the system's audio sensors had almost certainly logged his quiet outburst. *Please don't let that go on my permanent record.*

The screen displayed his consumption record in merciless detail:

MONTHLY ALLOCATION OF RED MEAT EXCEEDED. CARBON CONSUMPTION LIMIT VIOLATION IMMINENT. CONTINUED ATTEMPTS TO PURCHASE RED MEAT WILL RESULT IN FOOD ACCOUNT SUSPENSION.

He could try to override the decision. There was a tidy democratic button for that buried in the menu system. But attempting to challenge the algorithm was recognised as dissent, and dissent was crushed swiftly and efficiently. A simple rejection could lead to crippling fines that drained accounts to zero, or worse—a Psycho-Eval, the mental restructuring process designed to eliminate independent thought and sand away the rough edges of a personality until only smooth compliance remained.

The momentary thrill of anticipated rebellion evaporated like moisture on hot concrete, replaced by the bitter taste of obedience. The casual cruelty of it all struck him yet again: the system's genius lay in these constant, low-level degradations, the thousand small surrenders that accumulated into a life. He was powerless.

His eyes moved down the list to the acceptable alternatives. There, highlighted in encouraging green, was a box of mealworms, vacuum-packed and protein-enriched, labelled with the cheerful suggestion, "Try mealworms! Sustainable protein for a sustainable future!". It cost 0.01 carbon units. He selected it. The screen instantly responded:

PURCHASE APPROVED. THANK YOU FOR YOUR RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION.

The box dropped into the collection drawer with a hollow thump. Jonnie retrieved it, the packaging cold and slightly greasy against his palm. Through the transparent cellulose film, he could see the desiccated insects, their segmented bodies pressed together in neat rows. His stomach turned, but he tucked the box

into his jumpsuit pocket and pulled his coat closed to hide it. Hunger would make them palatable eventually. Hunger made cricket sandwiches palatable, too. Hunger always did.

He walked through the corridor towards the building's transit node, his footsteps echoing on the hard surfaces. The walls here were bare grey composite, broken only by screens displaying the Global State's ever-growing roster of undesirables: portraits of those who had been denied social credits. The pictures of human beings who had been Blacklisted flashed on screens like mugshots on a twisted most-wanted show, accompanied by the Global State's reassuring slogans:

UNITY THROUGH COMPLIANCE. STABILITY THROUGH SACRIFICE. YOUR COOPERATION CREATES OUR COLLECTIVE SECURITY.

He briefly contemplated calling Nicola, his girlfriend of two months. Pleasant, predictable Nicola with her steady temperament and unquestioning compliance. She was safe, approved and properly credentialed. Their relationship had been vetted algorithmically before they'd even met—matched on compatibility scores and their social credit rating.

He pulled out his phone and accessed the Global State App, the device that served as his digital wallet, identification and electronic leash. His fingers moved across the screen with practised efficiency, selecting a pre-vetted text string from the approved communication templates and sending it to Nicola:

Routine check-in. Status green.

Nicola responded within seconds:

Green. See you later, 84773201.

She used his ID number rather than his name, the way everyone now did in digital communications. It was more efficient, the Global State had told them. More secure. More honest about what they all were: numbered components in a vast machine.

He allowed himself a moment of sentimentality as his thoughts drifted to his family. Travel outside your zone was allowed for familial obligations and Jonnie made full use of that, never missing a Sunday lunch at his parents' duplex in Mile End. His lips twitched as he remembered how the flat always smelled of lab-grown roast and regulation vegetables. Unfortunately, his brother, Joey, now lived in Birmingham, so they rarely saw each other, but they spoke regularly. They had to

be so careful, though, not to trigger the monitoring algorithm, that their conversations often ended up being mundane. They were a close family, successfully defying the Global State's subtle attempts to undermine the family unit and to replace blood bonds with loyalty to them.

As he entered the transit tube queue, joining the silent line of grey-clad citizens, he pulled up his personnel file. It was a nervous tic, this constant checking, this digital self-examination. He scrolled past his near-perfect record, his rising social credit score and his Level 4 clearance. Each metric was a small reassurance that he was safe, protected and valued. Then he paused. The final line of his file was glowing a soft, celebratory blue, pulsing gently like a heartbeat:

ACCESS LEVEL 5 CLEARED. EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY.

A breath caught in his throat. Level 5. Not just security, but status. The highest level of clearance for analysts. He had officially cemented his position among the compliant few, protected from the arbitrary fines and rationing that afflicted the masses. He was inside the system, truly inside. Protected by it. The Global State had rewarded his fidelity.

Level 5 meant he could finally afford the permit to visit Joey in Birmingham without triggering carbon violations. It has been six months since he'd seen his brother in person. Joey's wife was pregnant again. He wanted to be there when the baby came. He wanted to hold his niece or nephew before the system registered them, chipped them and absorbed them into the grid. That's what this promotion bought: not just protection, but proximity. The chance to reclaim something human.

He typed a quick message to Joey:

I levelled up to 5. I'll be there to meet your new baby.

His chest loosened and he took a deep breath. The notification glowed on his screen. He was Level 5. It was official. It was permanent. His thumb hovered over the send button as he savoured the moment. Then he pressed down and committed the news to the surveillance grid that would log it, analyse it and file it away as evidence of his contentment.

He passed through the facial recognition checkpoint, the red laser mapping his features in microseconds and then presented his hand to the biometric scanner. He felt the small pulse as the scanner connected with his chip and logged his entry. The barrier retreated and Jonnie stepped forward. The transit pod arrived and the

doors hissed open, releasing a rush of stale, recycled air. Jonnie followed the citizen in front of him inside and settled into a hard seat. His posture relaxed, the tension in his shoulders easing for the first time that morning. For a moment, he forgot about the surveillance grid and carbon quotas and thought about what Level 5 access meant. He permitted himself a small smile. As a Level 5, he would be protected from the Global State’s random cruelties. In a way, it was freedom.

The transit pod hummed through its tunnel, the sound vibrating through the seat up into Jonnie's spine. Within minutes, the pod stopped, its doors opening with a pneumatic sigh that released him into the dense, monitored heart of his zone.

He was close to an old protest area now—he could tell by the increased security presence. Facial recognition scanners protruded from every corner, their lenses dark and unblinking. ID checkpoints glowed with red warning lights. But the biggest tell was the way citizens moved through these spaces with hunched shoulders and averted gazes.

Jonnie adopted the practised walk of a compliant, registered citizen: quick, but not hurried steps and head slightly lowered to avoid eye contact with the few other people moving through the streets. Slow steps could suggest loitering, which could suggest malicious intent. Hurrying, however, could mean you were running away—and only those with malicious intent needed to run away. And eye contact well, eye contact could be misconstrued. Eye contact could suggest conspiracy, collusion and dissent. So Jonnie moved through the desperate city with quick steps and lowered head, past darkened shop windows and apartments where lights flickered on and off on timers to ensure that energy quotas were enforced—two hours on in the morning, three at night. An old woman shuffled past carrying candles, her breath misting in the air. It was winter in London, but the radiators stayed cold unless you had the credits to override the mandate.

The smell of lab-grown protein hit him before he saw the food centre with its queues snaking round the block for the week's ration packs. No meat—not for Level 3 citizens. Meat was an environmental luxury, the posters said, reserved for those serving the Global State's vision. He'd seen the ministers on the screens, though, carving into steaks at summit dinners while lecturing ordinary citizens about their carbon footprints and necessary sacrifice.

A decade ago, it had been UN Sustainability Agendas—lofty promises about saving the planet through voluntary cooperation between sovereign nations. Then the aliens had arrived and nations stopped arguing and started kneeling, their puppet leaders reading scripts written in Chatham House in London. And the new overlords dictated policy from heights no one could see.

This nightmare hadn't erupted overnight. There was no dramatic collapse, just slow strangulation—one emergency power at a time, one crisis justifying the next, until control was so deeply embedded in the infrastructure that resistance felt like trying to breathe underwater.

Jonnie saw them as he rounded a corner: a small group of four people huddled near a boarded-up shop, its windows covered with weathered plywood. Perhaps a family, perhaps just friends discussing travel permits or food allocations. Their heads were close together, their voices low, their posture suggesting the kind of private conversation that was increasingly rare. Before he could look away, an overhead drone pivoted silently on its axis. Its spotlight activated, bathing the four figures in harsh white light. A synthesised voice boomed from the drone's speakers, cold and final:

ATTENTION. UNAUTHORISED POLITICAL MEETING DETECTED. PARTICIPANTS' ACCESS TO FINANCIAL SERVICES HAS BEEN SUSPENDED. REPORT TO NEAREST COMPLIANCE CENTRE WITHIN SIX HOURS OR FACE ADDITIONAL SANCTIONS.

The four citizens scattered instantly, their conversation abandoned, their faces twisted with terror. Jonnie knew what would happen to them. A non-compliant social media post could cost you fifty social credit points. An unauthorised gathering of more than three people led to immediate arrest and potential Blacklisting. Once Blacklisted, you were banned from getting a phone number, a bank account, or a digital wallet. It made finding work impossible. And finally, you became homeless because your family or friends couldn't take you in, or they'd risk becoming Blacklisted themselves. The cascade was swift and merciless.

Tens of thousands already haunted the margins of the 15-minute smart cities, Blacklisted for refusing multiple vaccinations, practising religion, or speaking out against the Global State. Jonnie had seen their hollowed, haunted faces sleeping in unapproved zones. He'd learned not to look.

Jonnie walked past the site quickly, eyes fixed ahead. One of the scattered citizens—a woman, middle-aged, terror stark on her face—stumbled into his path. Her hand shot out and grasped his sleeve. Jonnie jerked his arm away, harder than necessary, tearing the fabric of his thin jumpsuit. He didn't look at her face; he couldn't afford to see her as human. He kept walking, his heart hammering, his pace steady. Behind him, he heard her sob, a raw sound quickly swallowed by the street's ambient hum.

He heard a beep coming from his pocket. The Global State App told users when they were within a fifty-foot radius of someone Blacklisted. He didn’t check the alert, but knew that it was directed at her. The Global State worked fast. He would lose points if he acknowledged her, so he kept walking. He told himself it was pragmatism and self-preservation. But the lie tasted like metal and he couldn't quite swallow it. Feeling paranoid, he pulled out his phone again, accessing the Global State App with a swipe. His fingers moved automatically through the familiar motions. He scrolled to his Digital ID and checked his status again:

CITIZEN 84773201. CLEARANCE: LEVEL 5. STATUS: COMPLIANT.

He was still safe.

He moved swiftly, shoving his hands into his pockets and ensuring his posture remained non-threatening, his breathing controlled. The torn sleeve felt like an accusation against his skin.

Jonnie's phone buzzed again as he approached the entrance to the secure data centre, but this time it was an incoming message. A photo attachment loaded slowly: an ultrasound image, grainy and surreal. His brother's message:

It's a girl. Due in March. You'd better get your travel permit sorted, Uncle Jonnie.

Uncle Jonnie. The words made his chest tight in a way that had nothing to do with surveillance or compliance scores. He typed back quickly:

I'll be there. Promise.

He meant it. He reminded himself that the system rewarded loyalty and loyalty bought you the things that mattered. Family. Connection. A future that wasn't just about survival.

He pocketed the phone and placed his hand on the biometric scanner, ready to prove his worth.

Chapter 2

Project Blue Beam

The doors to the secure data centre whooshed open and Jonnie wrinkled his nose as the rush of air hit him. The air in here always smelled wrong. He licked the back of his teeth and swallowed, but he couldn't get rid of the sharp, metallic taste coating his mouth—like he'd licked a battery terminal.

He stepped cautiously through the doorway. The cold air—set to precisely 16.5 degrees Celsius—raised goosebumps along his forearms beneath the sleeves of his jumpsuit. He slipped his coat back on and pulled up the hood. The walls were smooth composite panels that absorbed sound, creating a peculiar deadness to the air as if the room itself swallowed all evidence of human presence. There were no windows.

Cold blue terminal screens glowed in neat rows, each one a portal into the Global State's operational nervous system. Jonnie approached his assigned terminal, nodding a greeting to a couple of his fellow analysts who looked up at his passing. His heart beat faster than usual. He placed his left hand against the biometric scanner, feeling the familiar tingle as the device interrogated the chip beneath his skin. The sensation lasted longer here, more invasive, probing deeper. The screen flashed white, then resolved into crisp black text:

CITIZEN 84773201. CLEARANCE: LEVEL 5. WELCOME, ANALYST.

Level 5. It still hadn't fully sunk in.

He logged into the budget allocation system, his fingers moving across the keyboard with practised efficiency. Unlike the lower-level databases that siloed information, giving a user only what was strictly necessary to fulfil their very specific, very compartmentalised function, Level 5 analysts had access to the raw

data. Not the whole system, of course—nobody had that—but all the data for their department. As a Level 5 budget allocation data analyst, Jonnie now had access to every budgetary allocation, every payroll, every requisition, every purchase order, every invoice and every expenses claim filed across the Global State. In a system that surveilled everything, tracked everything—and for someone who knew how to read the data—it revealed the flow of resources and power across the entire planet. Despite his new clearance level, Jonnie's job was rather mundane: he verified infrastructure spending against mandated resource allocations. Today, he cross-referenced invoices for local control networks—cameras, facial recognition arrays, drone maintenance contracts—with hardware procurement orders.

It was essential work, but it was boring: read a number, check it, mark it as verified. Anomalies were so rare that he soon found his breathing slowing and his shoulders slumping as he got lost in the glowing columns of data.

He'd been working for a couple of hours when his eye snagged on something—a line item buried deep within the budget for the upcoming quarters. The amount made his breath catch: fifty billion. It was allocated to a project labelled "AR-Infrastructure: Q3/Q4".

Jonnie frowned and leaned closer to the screen, his nose nearly touching the cool glass. Atmospheric Research Infrastructure. That was a category tag, not a project. It covered climate monitoring and weather systems. You'd expect to see something like that broken down into individual projects like maintenance for remote weather beacons, or the purchase of new high-altitude weather drones. And fifty billion for two quarters?

It had to be a mistake. But wouldn't a mistake of this magnitude have been spotted before it got to him? His hands hovered over the keyboard. The analyst in him—the part that took pride in solving puzzles and finding the logical explanation for every mystery—couldn't let it go. He began drilling down, following the trail through layers of tender awards and contractor estimates. The information was not easy to find. Every shell company he discovered seemed to lead to another, and every public-private partnership he thought he'd untangled only revealed another complicated knot. Sweat began to bead at his temples despite the cold air.

After almost four hours, without a break, Jonnie finally traced the funding stream to a consortium of contractors. Their profiles loaded on his screen: advanced sensor technology, high-frequency signal generation, large-scale structural engineering.

"They're building sensors?" he asked under his breath, his voice sounding muffled in the sound-dampened room. "What kind of sensors cost fifty billion?"

Andrew, the analyst sitting across from him, looked up and frowned at the interruption. "Sorry," Jonnie mouthed back.

He shook out his hands to relieve his cramped fingers and stretched his back. The crack in his spine was audible and he winced. With a deep exhale, he accessed the detailed procurement manifest. The jargon was dense, but Jonnie was persistent. Massive transmission towers. Satellite uplink hubs. Highly-classified transmission arrays. And something else, buried in a sub-folder marked "Restricted: CGI rendering systems". His stomach clenched as he scanned through the document. Why did the Global State need high-capacity holographic projection equipment? He cross-referenced the geographical coordinates specified for deployment. The largest installations were clustered in remote regions, concentrated heavily in Antarctica.

The room suddenly felt smaller. The walls pressed in and the recycled air became too thick to breathe properly. His heart hammered against his ribs, each beat painful and distinct.

Jonnie pulled up the final documentation layer. The screen refreshed slowly, as if the system was fighting to keep this final secret hidden. But after seconds that stretched like molasses, the screen flashed with a name in bold capital letters: "PROJECT BLUE BEAM".

For a minute, Jonnie forgot how to breathe. The room tilted before his brain remembered it needed oxygen. He gasped and coughed as his panicked brain and lungs fought to work together again.

Andrew sighed loudly and rolled his eyes. "Sorry, sorry," Jonnie mouthed again, fighting to control his breathing.

He looked back at his screen, blinking rapidly. Read the title again. "PROJECT BLUE BEAM". The letters hadn't changed. His hands had gone numb where they gripped his desk. They were distant things at the end of his arms that no longer

fully belonged to him. There was a high-pitched ringing in his ears, thin and persistent.

No. It's a mistake. It must be.

He shook his head vigorously, but whether in denial or to get rid of the ringing, he couldn't say.

Project Blue Beam was just a conspiracy theory. It was a paranoid fantasy whispered among the Blacklisted. Except here it was on the Global State's own system. Real documentation with official stamps, clearance codes and department authorisations.

Proof.

His fingers moved without conscious direction, scrolling through the Executive Summary. The words burned themselves into his retinas, each sentence a small detonation in his carefully-constructed reality.

CLASSIFIED – EYES ONLY – LEVEL 5 CLEARANCE

Project Designation: Blue Beam

Operational Status: Phase 1 and 2 Complete / Phase 3 Deployment Scheduled Q3-Q4

Authorising Body: Global Security Council / Unified Command Structure

Executive Summary:

Phase 1 (Complete): Initial psychological conditioning via coordinated digital messaging event. Simulated extraterrestrial contact broadcast across all networked devices. Public compliance: 87%. Resistance elements isolated and flagged for targeted intervention.

Phase 2 (Complete): Antarctic Atmospheric Research Infrastructure (AARI) deployment. High-frequency holographic transmission arrays operational. Satellite relay network integration: 94% coverage. Ground-based projection systems calibrated for coordinated atmospheric events.

Phase 3 (Scheduled): Full-scale simulation of extraterrestrial atmospheric presence. Coordinated global projection using satellite holographic relay technology. Target psychological impact: existential threat perception sufficient to eliminate remaining non-compliant populations and consolidate world governance authority.

Strategic Objectives:

- *Permanent centralisation of governance structures under unified command*
- *Population compliance enforcement via manufactured crisis framework*
- *Integration of carbon allocation systems, biometric tracking and behavioural scoring infrastructure*
- *Elimination of sovereign resistance through perceived existential emergency*

Operational Notes:

- *Antarctic Treaty Zone infrastructure purposed to broadcast capability*
- *Public narrative: climate research / international cooperation*
- *Actual function: theatre-scale holographic projection equipment. DEW (Directed Energy Weapons) deployment authorised for atmospheric effect simulation and structural "evidence" generation to support extraterrestrial threat narrative*

Jonnie swallowed and scrolled further.

The documentation continued, outlining timelines, budget allocations and psychological impact assessments. He scrolled past graphs measuring public fear response and projections for what the document termed "compliance acceleration" following the commencement of Phase 3.

One section referred to a framework laid out as far back as 1945:

The establishment of the United Nations (UN) provided the foundational narrative of global unity through manufactured crisis resolution. The post-war population was primed for sovereignty surrender under the promise of permanent peace. The seventy-year period following the foundation of the UN allowed for the establishment of the infrastructure (e.g. central banking systems, educational standardisation, media consolidation, NGO networks) necessary for the transition to centralised governance. However, ongoing conflict remained key to ensuring global populations continued to depend on centralised authority structures.

Another laid out the control architecture with bureaucratic detachment:

Coordinated institutional capture (e.g. through finance, education, media, policy) enables management of the narrative at scale. Public perception of independent governance can be maintained through the theatre of national sovereignty (i.e. maintenance of dynastic rulers and continuance of national governments under a global authority structure).

There was even a risk assessment section:

History has shown that population groups prove less resistant to restrictions on their civil liberties when they are facing a crisis – e.g. war, disease, famine, etc. Research from focus groups indicates that an alien threat narrative is sufficient to override individual liberty concerns. The existing narrative about climate breakdown, and the sustainability enforcement mechanisms already introduced under global accords such as the Paris Agreement and COP agreements, etc., provide a framework that can be built upon, adding additional mandates as needed (e.g. energy quotas, dietary restrictions, movement limitations) under the guise of a humanitarian crisis. This combined approach offers the best solution to ensure that population groups accept the imposed control infrastructure as protective rather than oppressive.

Jonnie's hands fell away from the keyboard. The sterile, recycled air in the Level 5 data room felt suffocating now, too thin. The crisis that had unified humanity under the Global State had been manufactured. The whole thing was a lie. And he had spent the last two years helping maintain it. Jonnie struggled to process the enormity of the deception. The system he had trusted—that had defined him, that had promised him security in exchange for obedience—was the enemy.

He tried to stand, but his legs wouldn't hold him. He collapsed back into the chair, the synthetic material squeaking under his weight. He dropped his face into his hands, pressing the heels of his palms against his eyes until he saw spots.

Breathe. Just breathe.

But he couldn't seem to take in enough oxygen. It felt like a fist was squeezing his heart. He bent over and put his head between his knees before he got too light-headed. But that made his breakfast rise in his throat, sour and threatening. He sat back up and swallowed hard, forcing the bile back down.

"Are you okay?" The voice seemed to come from very far away, so it took Jonnie a second to realise it was the analyst seated to his left. Jen? Jean? She had only been here for a couple of weeks.

"Yes. Um, I mean, no," Jonnie stammered. "I'm a bit light-headed. Skipped lunch."

"That's not smart. You should take a break and get something from the vending machine," she advised. "Good thing your shift's almost done."

"Yeah," he agreed, forcing a small smile.

She smiled in return and then turned back to her terminal, sneaking occasional glances at Jonnie to check on him. The rest of the analysts around them ignored him, although Jonnie saw Andrew roll his eyes again. He resisted the temptation to roll his eyes back. Andrew was a bit of a stuffy git.

Breath in two three four Hold two three four Breath out two three four

The box breathing helped and he felt his heartbeat slow. But it couldn't calm his chaotic thoughts. Every sacrifice he'd made, every careful step through the minefield of compliance—all of it had been in service to a lie. He had helped to enforce a fairy tale. He'd been the villain in his own story and called it virtue.

Something within him broke, sharp and irretrievable. He had exactly two choices: close the file and pretend he'd never seen it, or accept that Citizen 84773201 was about to die so that Jonnie Villin could finally learn what it meant to be free again.

Chapter 3

The Compliance Mask

Jonnie emerged into a London that no longer felt like a city, but a stage production where every citizen was an unwitting extra in a script written by hidden overlords. He made it less than two blocks from the data centre before he had to find a public toilet in which to vomit.

He knelt on the cracked floor tiles, hands braced against the porcelain, his body rejecting what was left of the beige nutrient slurry along with the knowledge that had detonated his understanding of reality. The overhead light flickered with faulty wiring that the maintenance algorithms hadn't prioritised. In the stuttering light, he watched his compliance dissolve into the chemical-scented water along with the contents of his stomach.

Project Blue Beam.

The words repeated in his mind like a computer virus, replicating, spreading through every neural pathway, corrupting every assumption upon which he'd built his life. The alien threat that had unified humanity—that had justified the surveillance state, the biometric chips, the carbon rationing, the Psycho-Evals—was a lie. A lie that had deceived the whole world.

But now he knew the truth.

Jonnie flushed the toilet and walked to the sink on trembling legs. He stared at his reflection in the cracked mirror. The face looking back was pale and beaded with sweat. The eyes looked haunted. It was the face of a man who knew too much, who'd become an enemy of the Global State without meaning to. All he had done was look at some files his Level 5 clearance granted him permission to see. It wasn't his fault.

But that wouldn't matter.

They would notice. It might take some time, but they would notice. The access logs would flag his terminal session and his prolonged time reviewing restricted documents. The AI would notice. It noticed everything.

But not immediately. Not yet.

The realisation settled over him like ice water: he had a window. Hours—maybe days if he was lucky—before the algorithmic audit flagged his behaviour as anomalous. He had time to act, time to decide what to do with the catastrophic knowledge burning behind his eyes.

He washed his face and composed his expression into something approaching normal. Then he walked back out into the monitored streets. On the outside, he tried to appear as if everything was normal, but inside, he knew that nothing would ever be normal again.

* * *

The next morning's checkpoint queue moved with its usual shuffling efficiency. Citizens held out their left hands for the scanner, received their green tick of approval, and moved through the barriers without making eye contact. Jonnie joined them, keeping his breathing steady and his posture compliant.

The red laser swept across his embedded chip. His entire body tensed, waiting for the alarm, the orange screen, the security officers.

The scanner beeped green.

CITIZEN 84773201. CLEARANCE LEVEL 5. STATUS COMPLIANT.

He nearly laughed. He nearly broke down right there in the queue. Hysteria bubbled up his throat like the vomit he'd expelled in the public bathroom. They didn't know. The system still thought he was a man tamed by fear.

He walked through the barrier and it felt like stepping through a membrane—still inside the system's embrace, but fundamentally changed. Contaminated by truth.

Back at his workstation in the Level 5 hub, Jonnie logged in and stared at his terminal screen. Around him, analysts worked in their individual bubbles of

concentration, maintaining the vast bureaucratic machinery that kept citizens monitored and controlled.

He saw them differently now. They weren't colleagues, but accomplices—participants in a mechanism of oppression built on a manufactured threat. Did any of them know? Had any of them glimpsed the truth and chosen to look away? Chosen comfort over conscience?

His hands moved across the keyboard automatically, pulling up routine data streams while his mind worked through his options.

Option one: report. Tell his supervisor what he'd seen, escalate it through the proper channels, and trust that someone in the hierarchy would care that the Global State was built on a lie. But that was suicide. They'd restructure his mind in a Psycho-Eval centre before he finished his second sentence. Option one wasn't an option at all.

Option two: run. Extract the chip from his hand and disappear into the margins where the Blacklisted survived. But that would mean abandoning his family and friends, and everyone who knew him would be questioned and flagged by association. So, not option two.

Which left option three: resist. He could copy the files and preserve the evidence to build a case against the Global State. He could join the Resistance and help them spread the truth. It was the only plausible option. And if he was careful if he stayed within acceptable patterns

Jonnie pulled up the budget allocation database, retracing yesterday's path. This time, he made screen captures, routing them to an encrypted partition on his personal device. He was careful not to trigger any alerts, careful to make it appear that he was just an analyst doing thorough work and cross-referencing expenditures. Doing acceptable overtime.

Each screenshot made him feel ill all over again.

"You alright, mate?"

Jonnie started, then looked up to find a colleague from Carbon Compliance hovering beside his desk, concern creasing his face. He was the epitome of a compliant citizen: promoted six months ago to Level 5 with an impeccable social credit—the kind of colleague who volunteered for compliance seminars.

"Fine," Jonnie said, the lie tasting like copper. "Just tired. Been working overtime on some complex allocations."

"You look proper knackered. Maybe take a break? Get some of that lab coffee from the fourth-floor vending?"

Jonnie forced a smile, the muscles in his face moving mechanically, like puppet strings manipulated by someone who'd forgotten how humans expressed emotion. "Yeah. Good idea. Cheers, mate." His colleague nodded and returned to his workstation. The casual interaction felt surreal. How could this man discuss coffee breaks when the entire foundation of their world was a lie?

Jonnie took the stairs down to the fourth-floor break area. He placed his hand on the scanner and waited while the vending machine dispensed his drink into a compostable cup. He leaned against a wall, sipping the chemical approximation of coffee. The liquid was brown and bitter and did nothing to settle his stomach. Fellow analysts from Levels 4 and 5 were sitting and standing around in the break area, drinking tea and coffee, or eating snacks. How could they look so unconcerned? Like everything was normal?

Because they don't know. And if they did, would they care?

Jonnie returned to his terminal, the coffee burning his stomach. He pulled up another budget file, fingers moving mechanically while his mind spiralled.

"Careful with that one."

The voice was low, pitched beneath the ambient hum of the data centre. Jonnie's shoulders locked. He didn't know whether to turn and acknowledge the speaker, or pretend he hadn't heard.

Billy from Infrastructure Analysis leaned casually against the partition between their workstations. Although they'd worked at adjacent desks for eight months, they weren't more than acquaintances who had the occasional chat about football scores and ration quality at the vending machines.

"Careful with what?" Jonnie kept his voice neutral, but his hand moved fractionally towards the screen's privacy filter.

"The Antarctic procurement contracts." Billy's gaze flicked to Jonnie's monitor, then away. "A lot of analysts get flagged for spending too much time on those allocations. Complex routing structures trigger audit protocols if you're not careful about access patterns."

Jonnie's mouth went dry. "Just doing thorough work."

"Yeah. Thorough." Billy pulled up a chair, angling his body to block the nearest surveillance camera's view of Jonnie's terminal. The movement looked casual—just two colleagues collaborating—but it created a pocket of relative privacy. "Thing is, thorough work on certain files tends to result in sudden transfers. Or extended medical leave. Or compliance seminars that people don't come back from the same."

The air between them thickened with unspoken meaning. Jonnie studied Billy's face: mid-sixties, unremarkable features. He had the kind of face that disappeared in crowds. Billy had been promoted to Level 5 a few months before he and Jonnie met. There was nothing about him to suggest he was anything other than another compliant cog. And yet "Why are you telling me this?" Jonnie asked quietly.

"Because you've got that look. The one people get when they've seen something that breaks their understanding. Got the same look myself about a year ago. Stumbled across a line item that didn't make sense. Started pulling threads. Nearly got myself disappeared before someone found me and helped me."

"Someone?"

"People who ask the same questions you're asking. People who've learned how to survive the answers." Billy's eyes met his directly. "There's a network. Scattered underground. Folks who've figured out the system's built on something rotten. We're not heroes, mate. We're just trying to document the truth before it gets us killed."

Jonnie's heart hammered against his ribs. This could be a trap, a loyalty test designed to identify dissidents before they could organise. Or it could be his salvation. The difference between those options was whether he trusted his instincts or his paranoia.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Jonnie replied carefully.

Billy nodded, as if he'd expected that response. "Course you don't. But if you did, hypothetically, want to preserve certain files without triggering access alerts, you'd need to fragment the requests. Pull small portions across multiple sessions and mix it in with other routine stuff. Make it look like organic work patterns."

Billy took a folded piece of paper out of his pocket and slid it across the desk—actual paper, increasingly rare in the digital surveillance state. "Those are USB

supplier locations that don't log biometric purchases. Pay cash if you've got it, carbon credits if you don't, but spread the purchases across different days."

Jonnie stared at the paper without touching it. "Why help me?"

"Because we need people who still give a shit. And every person who figures out the truth, who survives long enough to document it, gives us one more chance that eventually, maybe, enough of us will wake up from this nightmare to do something about it." Billy stood, stretching. "Meet me for lunch today. There's more to this than you think."

"What?" Jonnie looked up sharply.

"Ahmed's place, the curry shop in Shoreditch. You know it?"

"The Curry King? Uh, yes."

"One-fifteen. See you there."

* * *

The Curry King was wedged between a betting shop and a vape emporium, its façade faded, but defiant. It was one of the few independent restaurants remaining under the Global State's hegemony that saw chains flourish and everything else wither. Jonnie scanned the street out of habit before pushing through the door.

The interior smelled of cumin and cardamom. Jonnie breathed deeply. The smell was almost overwhelming after months of bland supplements. Real cooking with real spices was an increasingly rare luxury.

Ahmed emerged from the kitchen, wiping his hands on an apron stained with turmeric. He was in his mid-thirties, compact and efficient in his movements. His friendly proprietor's demeanour almost, but not quite, masked a cautiousness in his eyes. Jonnie didn't miss the way he looked him up and down.

"Hello, mate. You okay?" Ahmed asked, gesturing to a corner booth. It also wasn't lost on Jonnie that the booth had a view of both the door and the street.

"That obvious?"

"You look like you've had a bad day." A slight smile tugged at his mouth as he gestured for Jonnie to take a seat.

"You could say that," Jonnie replied, sliding into the seat. The plastic was cracked but clean. "I'm meeting a friend. I think he's a regular. Billy?"

Ahmed nodded. "Yeah, he is. You've been here before, too, though; I recognise your face."

"You've got a good memory; it's been a while."

"Never forget a face, me." Ahmed tapped his head. "Billy should be here soon. Order something while you wait." He slid a worn, handwritten menu across the table. "You look like you could use some real food. No offence." He raised his hands, palms up and offered a crooked smile.

Jonnie grimaced. "None taken."

"So, what'll it be?"

Jonnie ran his eyes down the menu. "Um whatever's good."

"Everything's good. That's why they haven't shut me down yet. Tell you what, I'll get you Billy's usual. But I hope you have cash; no biometric scanners here. Oh, and the cameras?" He nodded towards two security feeds mounted in corners. "Those died mysteriously six months ago. Never got around to fixing them." He winked.

Before Jonnie could respond, the door chimed. Billy entered, moving with a casual ease that contrasted sharply with Jonnie's tension. He slid into the booth across from Jonnie, nodding at Ahmed. "The usual, please."

Ahmed returned to the kitchen without another word, leaving them alone in the corner booth. Just two colleagues having lunch. Billy leaned back, utterly relaxed. "Glad you came. That means you're either desperate, or genuinely committed to not being complicit anymore."

"Can't it be both?"

"Usually is."

"You said there's more to it. What can possibly be worse?" Jonnie asked.

"The way they've planned it for years."

"I saw that. It was in the files."

Billy waved a hand dismissively. "That's just the alien hoax. This goes way back—all the way back to World War II. It started slowly. First, the UN absorbed national militaries. Then the WHO took healthcare global. Then the WEF deliberately destabilised economies." He paused as Ahmed arrived with steaming plates of curry.

Jonnie picked up his fork. "I know all this. Basic civics."

"Right. But did you question it?" Billy was already eating, speaking between bites like they were discussing football scores. "By the time people realised having a Digital ID was the key to total compliance, it was too late. Remember getting your Government Gateway number?"

"Yeah, years ago. Had to register for what was it, council tax?" Jonnie took a bite of his curry. Flavour exploded on his tongue—real spices, real heat. He almost groaned in pleasure; he'd forgotten what actual food could taste like.

"Exactly. Seemed reasonable, right? Then they shut down the government website, made you download the MyGovApp instead."

"For convenience." Jonnie nodded.

"Convenience." Billy's smile was bitter. "Then gradually, so gradually you barely noticed, they absorbed everything else. Healthcare records. Banking. Travel permissions. Carbon credits. Social scoring. Every aspect of human existence got funnelled through one app on one device with one biometric signature. Before you realised what was happening, you were linked to the all-seeing-eye surveillance machine. And the MyGovApp became the Global State App."

"Jesus. Yeah, sneaky."

"Most people volunteered for their own enslavement, one convenient feature at a time." Billy swallowed, reached for water. "They didn't know. Couldn't see the full picture. But the architects did. They just needed universal adoption. That's why they needed the alien hoax: to speed things up and force the holdouts into compliance."

Jonnie put his fork down, appetite gone despite the excellent curry. "How long have you known?"

"Long enough to realise I was helping build the cage." Billy met his eyes. "That's why I'm telling you. We need to survive long enough to expose it. I'm in contact with the Resistance. I feed them intel when I can. I'm hoping you'll agree to help, too."

"And if things go sideways? If I'm flagged?"

"Come here. Ask Ahmed for the key. He'll get you underground to the Resistance." Billy gestured with his fork towards the kitchen. "He's connected to the network—safe houses, forged docs, people who can move you. Keep you safe."

"But if they're already tracking me—"

"Then you run. Fast. Don't go home, don't contact your family because they'll be monitored immediately. Cut out your chip. Just move and hope you reach the network before the drones reach you." Billy's expression went flat. "Most people don't make it, but some do. Better odds than waiting for Psycho-Eval, or worse."

Jonnie stared at his plate, at the rich, brown curry going cold. "I've got a brother. Joey. His daughter's due in March."

"I know. I pulled your file before I called you in." Billy's voice softened slightly. "That's why I'm warning you now, while you still have options. While you can still choose to turn away from this and pretend none of this has happened. Because if you go ahead, you need to know that once you're flagged, choices disappear fast."

"I can't pretend it didn't happen; that I didn't see what I did." Billy didn't say anything; he just watched Jonnie, waiting for him to talk through his options. "I want to help. But I also know that my days are probably numbered." At that, Billy smiled sadly and nodded once. "So, if when that happens, I what? I just abandon my family?"

Billy shifted in his seat. "You protect them by staying away. If you run, they'll question your family, monitor them, but eventually move on. But *you* will probably lose your family forever."

Jonnie hadn't considered that. He didn't know why he hadn't considered that. The cost of doing what Billy was proposing—what he was considering—was enormous. He wasn't sure if he was willing to pay the price.

Ahmed appeared with the bill written on actual paper. "Everything good?"

"Perfect, mate, as always." Billy pulled out cash and laid it on the table. No carbon credits. No biometric payment. Untraceable.

Ahmed pocketed it without counting. "See you next week?"

"If we're lucky." Billy stood and stretched. "Jonnie, good talking. Think about what I said."

But as Jonnie left The Curry King, stepping back into the streets of Shoreditch, he felt the weight of the conversation settling into his bones. He'd crossed another line just by listening. And there was no going back.

But at least now he had proof that he wasn't alone; proof that others had seen the truth and survived. Proof that there was a Resistance out there.

Proof that he might have a chance.

* * *

Back at his desk later that afternoon, during his allocated personal communication window, Jonnie pulled out his phone and stared at Joey's contact information. He needed to warn him; needed to tell him what he'd discovered. But every message and phone call was monitored and analysed by algorithms designed to detect dissent. He hesitated, his thumbs hovered over the screen as he thought. Then he typed carefully:

Remember when Dad took us on that fishing trip to that lake? The one where nothing lived because the water was polluted? Been thinking about that lately. Miss you, mate.

It was a private code they'd been using since they were children. "Fishing trip" meant things weren't what they seemed. "Polluted water" meant danger. Jonnie hoped his brother would understand. He sent the message before he could reconsider.

* * *

After a fraught week, Sunday dinner at his parents' house felt like attending his own funeral.

His mum had prepared lab-grown roast and vegetables, carefully rationed to stay within their carbon allocation. His dad sat in his usual chair, reading approved news feeds on his tablet and complaining about transport delays with the weariness of a man who'd learned that complaints were permitted as long as they stayed small. It should have felt normal and safe. It didn't. It had been two days and he hadn't heard a word from Joey. Jonnie sat at the table, fork moving food around his plate while his mind screamed.

"You're quiet, love," his mum said, watching him with a maternal concern that made his chest ache. "Everything alright at work? That promotion treating you well?"

"Fine, Mum. Just tired."

"Level 5's a big responsibility," his dad chimed in, not looking up from his screen. "You're doing important work, Son. Helping keep things running smoothly. Should be proud."

Proud. The word landed like a stone in Jonnie's stomach.

He wanted to tell them. He wanted to grab their hands, look them in the eyes and explain that everything—the compliance, the rationing, the surveillance they'd accepted as necessary—was built on manufactured terror. That the alien threat was a lie. That they'd surrendered their freedom for protection from an enemy that didn't exist.

But the words wouldn't come.

"Yeah," he muttered. "Proud."

His phone buzzed. Finally, a message from Joey:

Remember that fishing trip differently, mate. Water was clean. We caught loads. Dad taught us how to gut them properly. Good memories.

Jonnie's hands went cold. His brother had rejected his message. Joey had chosen compliance. Jonnie understood. Joey had a wife and another baby on the way. He needed to keep his family safe.

The rest of dinner passed in a fog. Jonnie nodded at appropriate moments, smiled when expected, and played the role of dutiful son. but something fundamental had broken inside him. He realised that his own family, the ones he'd thought would stand with him against anything, were lost. They had been so completely enslaved by the system that they wouldn't even hear the truth if it was offered.

* * *

At 11.09 on Monday, an orange glow appeared at the edge of Jonnie's terminal screen during his mid-morning data review:

ACCESS PATTERN ANOMALY DETECTED. CITIZEN 84773201 LEVEL 5 CREDENTIALS UNDER REVIEW.

They'd noticed.

This wasn't a full system lockdown—he could still log in and access routine files—but the AI had registered his behaviour as statistically improbable.

Jonnie forced himself to continue working and to maintain the appearance of normalcy while his mind raced. How long did he have? Hours? Days? When would the anomaly report escalate to human oversight? Trigger a compliance investigation? Result in his detention for Psycho-Eval?

He needed more time, more evidence, before they locked him out permanently. But he knew that every minute he stayed, every additional file he accessed, increased the risk exponentially.

At 13.30, during his lunch break, he walked four blocks to an analogue supply shop—the kind of place that still sold physical USB drives to citizens who preferred local backups. His carbon credits took the hit, flagging his account with a minor financial irregularity, but he purchased the smallest, highest-capacity drive available.

Back at his terminal, Jonnie copied everything: budget files, procurement records, contractor specifications—the complete digital paper trail of Project Blue Beam's construction. Each file transfer felt like defusing a bomb; one wrong move, one algorithmic alert, and it would all end.

The drive held 50 gigabytes when he finally ejected it at 16.42, just before the end of the shift. Now he had proof that humanity had been deceived and that the aliens above them were nothing but holograms, drone art and directed energy weapons. He slipped the drive into his boot beneath his foot, where biometric scanners wouldn't detect it.

Then he noticed a flicker on his screen: the orange that had first appeared in the corner of the terminal was bleeding across the screen, replacing the calming blue with its aggressive pulse.

His time was up.

CITIZEN 84773201 ACCESS PROTOCOL VIOLATION.

His body moved before his mind caught up, his hands flying back to the keyboard, fingers scrambling to punch in the logout command.

Nothing. The function was disabled. Greyed out. Unresponsive.

He tried to force a shutdown, jabbing at the power commands with increasing desperation. The terminal resisted, secure in its knowledge that it was smarter than its operator and faster than human panic. The screen pulsed brighter now, the colour seeming to throb in rhythm with his racing heartbeat.

He was trapped. The cage had closed the moment he'd copied the truth onto the USB. Somewhere in the maze of servers buried beneath the capital, his name was being moved onto the Blacklist. He was being designated an enemy of the Global State.

His eyes darted around the room, searching for options. The main door was sealed, requiring biometric clearance that would certainly be denied. The walls were solid. The surveillance cameras in the corners tracked him with their unblinking lenses, red recording lights glowing like predatory eyes.

There was only one thing he could do.

Jonnie's hand shot out, grabbing the heavy server manual from the desk beside him. The cover was thick plastic over metal binding, solid and weighty in his grip. His arm swung in a desperate arc, all his fear and rage channelled into the motion. The manual connected with the terminal screen. Glass exploded, shards glittering as they spun through the air. Sparks erupted from the shattered biometric reader, white-hot and acrid. Thick black smoke billowed from the ruined terminal, carrying the chemical stench of burning circuits and melting plastic. High-pitched alarms shrieked through the secure room, so loud they hurt his eardrums. The sound-dampening walls seemed to amplify rather than absorb the noise.

Jonnie didn't wait. Every one of his former coworkers watched in shock. He vaulted over the desk, his hip slamming painfully against the edge, his feet landing badly on the anti-static flooring. He scrambled for the main data conduit behind the terminal rack, knowing he was flagged now, permanently marked not for what he'd done, but for what he'd seen. His fingers found his Level 5 ID badge, ripping it from his collar with enough force to tear the fabric. The badge—his symbol of achievement, his proof of worth, his golden ticket to safety—felt like poison in his hand. He dropped it onto the sparking terminal, watching it as it began to melt in the heat.

Then he ran.

The service stairwell door loomed ahead, its red exit sign glowing like salvation or damnation—he couldn't tell which. His feet pounded against the floor, his breath ragged and burning in his throat, his mind screaming a single thought in endless repetition: *get out, get out, get out!* He slammed his shoulder against the exit door's emergency release bar. It swung open, spilling him into freedom.

Behind him, the alarms continued their shrieking.

Chapter 4

The Queue

The line to the checkpoint outside stretched for three city blocks, quiet except for the hum of surveillance drones overhead. Faces glowed faintly as each person held out their hand for the scanner. No chip, no exit.

Jonnie raised his sleeve, pulse quickening as the thin red laser passed over the embedded chip. A hollow beep.

STATUS: PENDING VERIFICATION.

His stomach dropped. The system had worked faster than he had anticipated.

The woman behind him hissed. "Move it." Her tone carried the rehearsed impatience of someone terrified to attract attention. Above the smart city, a drone pivoted. Its lens irised open, focusing on him. Jonnie forced himself to breathe, keeping his eyes down as the officer waved him towards the secondary booth.

"Just a glitch," he said quickly, although no one asked. The guard didn't look at him; none of them ever did. They just followed the AI's prompts.

The air in the secondary booth smelled faintly metallic, like overheated circuitry. Jonnie stood still, rigid, trying to anchor himself in the sterile reality of the moment. The small, grey room amplified the anxious thumping of his own heart. The officer, a young man with skin stretched too tight over his jaw, looked not at Jonnie, but at the screen. It glowed and Jonnie's ID file scrolled:

CITIZEN 84773201. AGE 37. DATA ANALYST. CLEARANCE LEVEL 5.

Then, the line that detonated his security:

FLAGGED FOR RESTRICTED ACCESS.

Jonnie's mouth went dry. No amount of bluster about a network error would save him. He'd been marked. He was Blacklisted. The system was nothing if not

efficient.

"Eyes front, citizen," the officer droned, not varying the pitch of his voice. He seemed like the perfect product of the Global State.

Jonnie felt the heat rise in his cheeks. He could hear the queue shuffling outside, the rhythmic beep-hollow-beep of standard verification. He used to welcome that sound, but now it sounded like the death knell for his everyday life. "Look, mate, there's been a mistake," he attempted, injecting a false, easy tone—the tone of a registered, compliant citizen. "I'm Level 5. Did the system log the update?"

The officer lifted his gaze only to glance past Jonnie's shoulder, confirming the presence of the steel-clad door. "The system logged sufficient data. It says to restrict your movements, 84773201."

Jonnie knew, with chilling certainty, that the small choices he had left were rapidly disappearing. This was the moment his agency began to be stripped away. "Restrict how, exactly?" he challenged. He needed a minute to construct a lie. *Make a move or perish, Villin.*

The officer tapped a glowing icon on the console. "You've failed the latest Compliance Assessment. You're required to go to Psychological Evaluation immediately."

Jonnie's muscles locked. There was Psycho-Eval and then there was Psycho-Eval. Even a routine Psycho-Eval—like for a failed Compliance Assessment—was something to be feared. But this would be so much worse. This would be the stuff of nightmares: the process of neural restructuring designed to eliminate independent thought. They wouldn't just be checking his compliance status; they would be trying to eradicate the dangerous knowledge he now carried. It would be the kind of Psycho-Eval that didn't leave much behind afterwards. A mindwipe.

"I've got a tight deadline today, mate," Jonnie insisted, his voice hardening as he abandoned the false affability. "I need my access granted. My job requires me to be mobile."

The officer's expression didn't change, but his eyes flickered down to the comms unit strapped to his wrist. He straightened up and squared his shoulders. The air in the booth thickened, suddenly heavy with unspoken threat. "You no longer have a job, 84773201," he stated flatly. "Your clearance has been revoked. All ties

severed. The Global State requires your full compliance. Failure to do so constitutes resistance."

He knew it was coming, but it still felt like a punch to the stomach. Jonnie was now financially, professionally and medically disconnected. He was Blacklisted. He might as well be a ghost.

The heavy, magnetic lock on the exterior door snapped shut. He was trapped.

"Right," Jonnie muttered, staring down the officer. "Looks like we're doing this the hard way."

He didn't hesitate, kicking the lower panel of the console in front of him with brutal efficiency. It protested the abuse with a sharp whine as Jonnie followed up with a swift punch at the console's screen. It shattered, spitting sparks and thick black smoke. The officer flinched, instinctively lifting his hands to protect his face from the sparks.

That fraction of a second was all Jonnie needed. He vaulted the counter, a desperate blur of motion, driving his shoulder into the officer's chest. The officer hit the wall with a sickening thud, the air knocked from his lungs. Jonnie snatched the officer's arm to reach his communications device—a thick, encrypted wristlet—and smashed it repeatedly against the desk until it was a useless chunk of smoking circuitry.

Jonnie's only goal right now was to buy time before the central AI logged the physical breach. But the system reacted immediately. High-pitched, piercing alarms tore through the booth, escalating the tension to a panic.

BREACH! BOOTH SEVEN! NON-COMPLIANT CITIZEN IS HOSTILE!

The synthesised voice shrieked the warning repeatedly from overhead speakers.

Jonnie grabbed the stunned officer's keys and scrambled for the exit lock. His hands shook, fumbling with the unfamiliar magnetic release. The door wouldn't budge. He risked a glance back at the officer who was struggling to his feet, reaching for the side holster Jonnie hadn't spotted. *That's not good.*

There was a second door, less heavily reinforced because it led to the building behind the booths, rather than the relative safety of the outside street. Jonnie didn't hesitate—an exit was better than no exit. He hurled the shattered console monitor across the room. It struck the wall beside the heavy wooden door, disabling an auxiliary panel. The lock hissed, weakened. Jonnie shoved his shoulder against the

frame, the wood groaning in protest. Then, with a jarring shudder, the lock gave way.

Jonnie bolted.

He burst out into a hallway slick with rainwater tracked in from outside. Two uniformed security enforcers rounded the corner thirty feet down the hall. They weren't the passive guards from the checkpoints—these men wore ballistic vests and carried guns.

"Get him! He's fleeing!" the officer shouted from the booth behind him.

Jonnie spotted an exit sign. Perfect. If he could just get outside, if he could just get high enough, he stood a chance. In the good old days, before the aliens and the surveillance, he had been one of London's most famous parkours. And rooftops were his speciality. The emergency exit lay roughly halfway down the corridor between him and the enforcers. The race was on.

Jonnie pivoted sharply into an emergency service stairwell, the door clanging shut behind him. He scrambled up the fire escape, lungs already burning. He emerged three levels up, kicking open a rooftop access panel that screeched as it opened. He staggered onto the exposed roof. Rain lashed down, chilling him instantly, but cleansing the metallic scent of the interrogation booth.

Above him, cutting through the smog, he saw the silent, dark shapes that represented the highest tier of surveillance. Drones. Not the tiny, passive models used for traffic control, but large, militarised quadcopters, their rotors humming low and menacingly. One pivoted, its lens open, focusing on him.

But Jonnie knew those rooftops better than any drone did.

He sprinted across the wet, gravel-strewn rooftop. The nearest building offered a tight jump, maybe ten feet across. It was a gamble, but preferable to being cornered by the two guards he knew were already racing up the stairs beneath him. He gathered speed and launched himself over the gap. His boots skidded on the ledge of the opposite roof, forcing him to clutch the slick concrete edge to avoid a twenty-foot plunge. He dragged himself up, gasping.

The drone overhead dipped low, its sensors screaming a warning. It fired a single lethal pulse. The blinding white flash missed Jonnie and struck the concrete behind him, leaving a smoking burn mark.

He descended rapidly into the building's service corridors, scrambling down through ventilation shafts and abandoned flats. He needed to disappear into the analogue decay of the city where the smart city's digital all-seeing system was least effective. After what felt like hours, but was probably only ten minutes, he burst out onto a narrow street in Shoreditch. The older district was characterised by derelict infrastructure that hadn't been fully integrated into the digital Global State.

The rain continued, washing the city in grey clouds. He needed to lose the chip, the source of his Digital ID, which was also the primary mechanism by which the Global State could track him. He ducked into a condemned loading bay, picking at the lining of his jacket to get to the Swiss Army knife he'd sewn in there for this precise eventuality. He pressed the sharp edge of the blade against the base of the palm on his left hand. His hand shook so badly that the first cut went wide, slicing skin without reaching the target. He gritted his teeth and tried again. The blade bit deeper this time. White-hot agony lanced up his arm, so intense his vision whited out for a second. A sound escaped him—animal and raw, but quickly bitten off. Blood ran hot over his fingers, making the blade slippery.

He had to stop. His body was screaming at him to stop. Every nerve was firing distress signals. But the chip was right there, a small hard lump under the bleeding skin. If he stopped now, if he lost his nerve

He dug the blade in sideways, levering, his breath coming in short, sharp gasps that might have been sobs. His hand spasmed, fingers clawing involuntarily. The chip shifted, moving under the ruined skin. "Come on. Come on, you bastard." And then he felt it pop free. It rolled onto his palm, a tiny piece of metal and silicon the size of a grain of rice, covered in his blood, slick and warm and finally, finally out.

Jonnie stared at it for three heartbeats. Then he dropped it into the chemical rain and watched it sink. Blood ran everywhere. He mopped it up as best he could, tearing a piece of his jumpsuit sleeve to wrap around the cut.

He was no longer Citizen 84773201. The Digital ID had been a dog leash. The social credit system had been the electric collar attached to it. And the Global State had been the one holding the leash. Jonnie had just cut his own leash. But by doing so, he'd also cut his access to everything that allowed survival in this world.

The realisation should have felt like freedom. Instead, it felt like falling.

A memory surfaced unbidden: Sundays with his parents, his mum fussing over whether he'd eaten properly. The kind of boring domesticity Jonnie had taken for granted. He'd never have that again. There was so much he'd never have again. Nicola's hand in his, her steady presence. The quiet future they'd never discussed, but both wanted. His brother he'd never see him again. Never be there for his niece's birth, as he'd promised. Never be Uncle Jonnie again. Every connection, every person who made him something more than Citizen 84773201, was gone. Cut away with the same blade that freed him.

They would all be questioned. Their accounts would be frozen. Their compliance scores obliterated. They'd be under a microscope. Because of him.

It felt like a fist was squeezing his heart, wringing it out like a damp rag. He pressed his back against the cold concrete wall of the stairwell, gasping for air that wouldn't satisfy. His eyes burned. He pressed the heels of his palms against them hard enough to hurt.

He pulled his phone out with trembling hands. Joey's contact details glowed on the screen. His thumb hovered over them. One call, just to warn him. Just to tell him what he saw and why he was on the run. But no. They would trace him to this exact location within seconds.

The worst part was that they'd never know why he'd run. They'd think he'd gone bad, become a terrorist, betrayed everything they believed in. They'd see his face on Global State broadcasts marked "TRAITOR" and believe it.

His chest hitched once more, a sound halfway between a laugh and a sob. Then he forced himself to move on.

The adrenaline began to fade, replaced by a deep, shivering exhaustion. He needed refuge. Jonnie pulled his hood low over his head, walking with the practised gait of someone who didn't want to be registered by the overhead scanners.

The sign for The Curry King flickered, half the LEDs dead. Jonnie pushed the door open. A bell chimed sadly. The delicious smell of curried spices eased his fear for a second. The restaurant was empty. "Closed, mate," Ahmed said, his voice curt and thick with genuine London cynicism. He didn't look up from wiping down a counter that was already clean.

Jonnie leaned against the counter, his jacket dripping water onto the floor tiles. "I didn't come for a vindaloo, Ahmed. It's me. I need the key."

Ahmed stiffened, his eyes finally flickering up. He swept a look over Jonnie, pausing at the blood-smeared makeshift bandage on his left hand. He glanced at a photo of his family hanging on the wall. "Key to what? You've lost me, mate," Ahmed insisted, wiping the same spot harder.

"Don't make me say it out loud, yeah? You know, the one that will lead me away. Somewhere safe."

Ahmed's frightened silence stretched, making Jonnie want to scream with anxiety. Billy had said that Ahmed was connected to the Resistance and that he could get Jonnie underground. But had Billy lied to him? Was this all some sort of compliance test?

Jonnie panicked. "Look, I'm marked, mate. I'm an enemy of the Global State now. I need to get out of the city, find the others outside the system."

Ahmed set the rag down and finally looked Jonnie in the eye. He studied him for a moment, a muscle ticking in his jaw. Then he reached under the counter and pulled out a worn key. "Go through the back freezer. There's a door in the far wall, hidden behind a shelf stacked with boxes. The shelf pulls forward—the hinge release is on the back of the third shelf, on the left side. The door leads to an unused service tunnel. Follow the tunnel until you see the mark—do you know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I think so," Jonnie nodded.

"Turn left at the mark. You got maybe thirty minutes before the drones get here."

Jonnie took the key, his fingers brushing Ahmed's. The contact felt like a small, risky alliance against a monstrous entity. "Thanks, mate," Jonnie whispered.

"Don't thank me," he replied, his voice barely audible. "Just get out. You bring them down on my head, I'll never forgive you. You ditched your phone, right?"

"Uh, no." Jonnie pulled it out of his pocket.

"Oh, you idiot." Ahmed snatched it out of his hands, opened the back and took out the battery and then the SIM. He picked up a glass and smashed it down on the SIM as hard as he could. "Well, we definitely don't have thirty minutes now. Don't you realise they can track this just as easily as your chip?" He shook his

head at Jonnie's foolishness. "Go, go!" He waved Jonnie towards the fridge. "There's a bag with essentials inside the door to the tunnel. Including a burner. Idiot." The last was said under his breath.

Jonnie couldn't believe he'd been so stupid. Of course they could track his phone. But he didn't have time to worry about that now. He slipped past the counter and pulled open the heavy, insulated freezer door. The temperature dropped instantly. He stepped inside, the blast of freezing air biting at his bloodied hand.

He found the hinge on the shelf at the back. It was stiff from the cold and needed some encouragement to open. But once open, the shelf moved surprisingly easily. The door behind the shelf blended seamlessly with the back wall of the freezer and it took him a minute of running his hand over the surface to find the keyhole. He unlocked the door, which opened into the stale, damp darkness of the service tunnel—the literal starting point of the underground resistance.

Above, the silence was broken by a sudden, intense whine—a drone moving directly overhead, closing in on The Curry King. Jonnie froze in the cold tunnel, hearing the heavy thud of the drone landing on the roof above the shop. The system hadn't waited thirty minutes. Facial recognition must have caught Jonnie on the street entering The Curry King—that, or his phone had led them straight to Ahmed.

He pulled the shelf back into place and scrambled to lock the door behind it. He sent up a nervous prayer, *please let Ahmed be okay.* Then he plunged into the darkness.

Chapter 5

The Underground

The unused service tunnel smelled of decades-old urine and damp brick. Jonnie's boots splashed through shallow puddles. Somewhere above his head, the city hummed with surveillance. Down here, the only sound was the scurry of rats and the creak of rusted pipes.

It was also as dark as the inside of a coffin. Jonnie fumbled inside the go bag Ahmed had provided. No torch. But his hand closed around the burner phone. He searched through the settings until he found the torch function. It would drain the battery, but he had no choice.

The tunnel sloped sharply downwards and branched four times before he found a chalk mark scrawled on the wall at about waist height: an "R" inside a circle. It was faded, but still visible on the brick. He turned down the narrow passage on the left, crouching as the ceiling dropped.

Ten minutes of stumbling brought him to a ladder. He climbed, muscles screaming, and emerged in what looked like an abandoned underground station. The platform tiles were cracked and covered in graffiti:

NO DIGITAL CHAINS. RESIST THE LIE.

And one that made his chest tighten:

THE SYSTEM SEES ALL.

Someone had risked everything to scratch those words into concrete. Someone had refused to disappear quietly.

He stopped to rest, exhausted and in pain. He couldn't stop the tears that flowed down his cheeks. Since he had cut out his chip and realised he really was about to lose everything, he had felt so alone. But he wasn't. Not really.

Somewhere out here in the darkness, others were choosing humanity over obedience—even if it cost them everything.

He spotted another mark at the end of the platform leading into yet another tunnel. Jonnie swallowed, gathered his strength, and lurched to his feet. He was tired and hungry, and he had no idea how far he had to walk before he found the Resistance. But he knew he wouldn't find them by loitering here. So he stepped into the darkness again.

The battery in the burner phone died later that evening, the torch function draining it quickly. He should have tried to make it last longer, but he also couldn't resist scrolling through the newsfeeds to see what they were saying about him. He watched his parents' terrified faces flanked by enforcement officers, while a photo of Joey's Birmingham flat appeared above a red banner that said "ASSOCIATE UNDER INVESTIGATION".

Jonnie's face filled every screen in the feed rotation, the photo from his Level 5 promotion now stamped with pulsing orange text:

ENEMY OF GLOBAL STATE. DETAIN ON SIGHT. ARMED PSYCHOLOGICAL EVALUATION AUTHORISED.

The phone's light blinked twice in a final protest, then surrendered to black. Jonnie stood in absolute darkness, one hand pressed against slimy brick, the other clutching the now useless device. The weight of the city above him suddenly felt immense—millions of tonnes of concrete and surveillance infrastructure pressing down on these forgotten spaces where the Blacklisted carved out an existence. He should've charged it. Should've found a junction box and spliced power somehow.

The rats didn't care about light. He heard their constantly skittering claws, the scratching echoing off the tile. Something brushed against his leg and he kicked out reflexively, connecting with soft fur and bone. The creature squealed and fled, but others remained. Always watching. Always waiting.

Jonnie moved by blind touch, trailing his hand along the tunnel wall. The hand where the chip had been implanted throbbed. He worried that it was infected. The Swiss Army knife hadn't been properly sterilised. The wound had bled more than he had expected, soaking through the makeshift bandage he'd fashioned from his torn sleeve. It was still oozing, the discharge thick and foul-smelling, and the skin around the incision warm to the touch.

* * *

Jonnie had been wandering for three days in the dark underground tunnels—three days of following nothing but faint chalk marks and hope—and he still hadn't found any Resistance cells. He had begun to panic. The emergency rations Ahmed had provided had run out after his first 36 hours, despite his best efforts to conserve them. Since then, he had been scavenging what food he could from commercial waste bins behind buildings where there were fewer surveillance cameras, emerging from the tunnels under cover of darkness. He desperately needed antibiotics and clean water. He also desperately needed not to be here, in the dark, lost beneath a city that wanted him dead.

The bins behind the synthetic protein factory were due to be emptied tonight. Jonnie had watched the pattern from a drainage grate last night, timing the security patrols and counting the seconds between drone passes overhead. Forty-seven seconds. Not enough time to scale the fence, rummage through waste and escape. But if he timed it perfectly with the patrol changeover at 02.30 maybe.

He was ready and waiting in the drain at 02.17, crouched in three inches of runoff that smelled of chemical treatment and human waste. His stomach had stopped growling; now all he felt was a hollow, gnawing sensation that left him with a constant headache.

At 02.30, he moved.

The fence was chain-link, rusted at the base where decades of moisture had corroded the metal. He squeezed through a gap that tore at his already tattered jumpsuit and scraped skin from his ribs, and emerged on the other side bleeding from a dozen shallow cuts.

The bins were industrial-sized black polymer that didn't rust. He hauled himself up using a drainage pipe, muscles trembling with effort, and looked inside. The smell hit him first: rot and chemicals, and the stench of protein waste that had been sitting in the heat. His stomach heaved. He swallowed bile and forced himself to reach into the festering mass. His fingers found something solid. He pulled free a vacuum-sealed package—torn open, but still containing perhaps a third of its original contents. The textured protein substitute was past its consumption date by six weeks, but Jonnie tore into it with his teeth.

He gagged at the taste of rancid fat and chemical preservatives, but he chewed and swallowed the biological hazard anyway, feeling his stomach cramp immediately in protest.

Overhead, a drone's rotors changed pitch.

Jonnie dropped flat behind the bin, pressing his face against concrete that reeked of old oil. The surveillance drone passed twenty feet above, its spotlight sweeping the facility perimeter in methodical arcs. Forty seconds. Forty-one. Forty-two.

It moved on.

Jonnie grabbed two more packages from the bin—one looked slightly less rancid—and ran for the fence and the safety of the tunnels.

He had developed a system to survive.

His mornings were for finding water. It was safest to move out at dawn when surveillance shifts changed and there was a brief dip in the algorithms' vigilance. Park fountains were the best source of water—before they were activated for public use. He'd drink until his stomach cramped and then fill the empty bottles from Ahmed's go bag.

During the day, he'd sleep in whatever shelter he'd secured—abandoned buildings, drainage systems, the gap beneath a railway bridge where the ground stayed dry. But never the same place twice and never anywhere the Blacklisted gathered in numbers—those spots were monitored and targeted for periodic sweeps.

In the evenings, he'd scavenge for food in the bins behind restaurants, outside residential blocks and in the service alleys of shopping districts. He had to compete with rats and other desperate humans who moved with the same furtive shame. As with the hunt for water, the best time was during the shift change around dusk.

And then there were the nights. At night, he'd hide. Wait. He'd do everything he could not to think about the life he'd lost.

Jonnie Villin, Level 5 analyst, compliant citizen, someone who mattered, was gone. As good as dead. The person, the *thing,* surviving in the underground tunnels was someone, *something*, else.

He'd stopped looking at his reflection in puddles.

* * *

The infection in his hand began spreading on day five.

By day six, his hand had swollen to nearly twice its normal size. The skin around the wound had turned purple-black, radiating heat that he could feel without touching. When he peeled back the filthy make-shift bandage, pus oozed out, thick and pale green, carrying a smell that made him gag. He desperately needed medical attention, but the moment he presented at a Global State clinic, he was as good as dead. No chip meant no health pass. No chip meant immediate detention for unauthorised healthcare access. And once the system had him again, it wouldn't be long before they figured out who he was.

By day seven, the fever was coming in waves. Periods of shivering cold were followed by heat that left him drenched with sweat. Jonnie had found shelter earlier that day in a ventilation shaft beneath a shopping complex that had been repurposed into residential housing for the compliant. The shaft was barely wide enough for his broad shoulders, but it provided warmth from the building's heating system and a metal grate through which he could watch the street. It was a good thing that it was a secure spot, because he couldn't have moved even if he'd wanted to.

In his delirium, he saw his mother's face and heard her asking why he wouldn't just comply. *I saw it, Mum. I saw the truth. The aliens aren't real. It's all lies.* But she just shook her head sadly and faded into the ventilation shaft's darkness.

His fever finally broke on day ten.

* * *

By day twelve, Jonnie was beginning to doubt his choice to run. He still hadn't seen any sign of anything that might be organised Resistance. He'd seen plenty of other furtive, scared people, other Blacklisted, but every person had looked as lost as he felt. They had avoided Jonnie, just like he had avoided them. He'd become a desperate, lonely shadow of his former self.

What's more, he was starving. He'd seen other Blacklisted begging near transport hubs, hands outstretched and faces carefully angled away from cameras. It violated everything he stood for, but hunger had dissolved his last reserves of dignity. He positioned himself near a checkpoint queue, far enough back that facial recognition wouldn't flag him, but close enough that passing citizens might see. He held out his uninfected hand, looking pathetic rather than threatening.

Most people walked past without acknowledging his existence. That was expected. Eye contact with the homeless Blacklisted risked social credit contamination. But one woman—middle-aged, carrying shopping bags from the market—paused. Her eyes met his briefly and he saw recognition there. Not of him specifically, but of what he'd become. One of the disappeared. One of the Blacklisted ghosts of the forgotten. She reached into her bag, pulled out something wrapped in paper and dropped it near his feet without stopping. Then she continued walking and didn't look back.

Jonnie waited until she'd rounded the corner before grabbing the package. A sandwich. Actual bread with some kind of protein paste filling. It was the most delicious thing he'd ever tasted. He ate it in small bites, tasting salt from tears he hadn't realised he was crying mixing with the protein paste.

That night, the doubts thundered into his head. What if he'd been wrong? What if Project Blue Beam was legitimate atmospheric research and he was being paranoid, reading into things that weren't there? What if the files he'd seen had simply been theoretical exercises and scenario planning for some worst-case doomsday crisis? Governments did that, right? What if he'd mistaken some tabletop exercise for operational reality? Level 5 analysts cracked sometimes. The pressure, the isolation, the weight of classified information it broke minds. Maybe his mind had broken. Maybe he was the conspiracy theorist, the paranoid lunatic.

He could go back. He could present himself at a compliance centre and explain that he'd had a mental breakdown. He could submit to the Psycho-Eval. They'd restructure his mind, of course—smooth away the rough edges of independent thought—but at least he'd be warm. Fed. Safe. And he'd be able to see his family again. Not right away but eventually. And they might go easier on him if he went in voluntarily.

The USB drive containing the files he'd copied was still in his boot. He could feel it if he wriggled his foot. He should look at the data again. Try to figure out if he was crazy or not. But he didn't know where he'd find an unmonitored terminal, let alone access it without a biometric chip.

He crouched in the dark, infection burning through his veins and hunger hollowing his stomach, wondering if he'd destroyed his life for nothing.

Chapter 6

The Safe House

Day thirteen found Jonnie plunging through sewer filth and stink in yet another unidentifiable underground tunnel. In the darkness, he had no sense of direction and no way to map the tunnels to the streets and buildings above him. When he did surface, he was often disoriented, finding himself miles from where he had expected to be.

He followed the tunnels, looking for actually, he wasn't even sure he knew what he was looking for anymore, but the alternative was lying down in the filth and never getting up. Jonnie wasn't a quitter, although he wasn't sure about that anymore either.

He'd been plodding through the tunnel for a couple of hours when he spotted it. He almost didn't—it was faded, rubbed off completely in one place. Jonnie squinted. It was faint, but it was there. He touched the damp wall of the tunnel with his forefinger. Red chalk. An "R" inside a triangle. He started laughing—humourless, hysterical cackles. He'd found them.

The sign pointed to a short tunnel to the left that ended in an access ladder. He could hear traffic noises, so he knew he wasn't far below the surface. He could also hear and feel vibrations—an underground transit, maybe—and smell chemicals.

He climbed the ladder and pushed open a trapdoor into what seemed to be a storeroom. Old washing machines hulked in the darkness like sleeping giants. Through the walls, he heard the rumble of active dryers. Four steps at the front of the room led to a closed door with a crack of light showing beneath it.

He paused before opening it and then pushed through into a room filled with harsh fluorescent light. Two women looked up from folding bed sheets. Their

murmured conversation died the moment he stepped through the door. Their eyes tracked him—the mud-stiffened jumpsuit, his hand dark with blood and sweat and something worse, the reek of the sewers clinging to him like a second skin. One of them shifted her weight backwards, edging behind the barrier of the counter.

The laundrette was cramped, with brown linoleum peeling at the corners. The fluorescent lights cast harsh shadows across the industrial washing machines that lined one wall—old models, pre-smart technology, the kind that couldn't report usage data to the grid. An invisible radio played static-laced music, barely audible over the rumble of the dryers lining the opposite wall. The air was humid, thick with the smell of cheap detergent and damp fabric.

The woman nearest to Jonnie moved first, but not on foot. Her wheelchair was old, manual, its chrome dulled by years of use. She manoeuvred it with practised efficiency, positioning herself between Jonnie and the exit behind the counter. She was maybe sixty, with grey-streaked hair pulled back into a severe bun. She had the kind of weathered face that came from decades of looking over your shoulder. Her legs, Jonnie noticed, were thin beneath worn trousers, the muscles atrophied from disuse. Her hand went to something in her pocket.

"Easy." Jonnie raised his bloodied hand, covered in filthy fabric. "Ahmed from The Curry King sent me."

The woman's eyes narrowed. "Ahmed's been compromised. Try again."

Jonnie's stomach dropped. "Shit. He gave me a key. Didn't give me up, or I'd be tagged by now."

"You have been tagged." She nodded towards the window. "They've been sweeping in widening circles out from The Curry King since you dropped off the grid. You didn't run far enough—we're within the search grid.

"We're going to have a hell of a time getting him out of here without being spotted," the second woman spoke up. Jonnie looked at her properly for the first time. She appeared to be in her early thirties, with close-cropped dark hair and the kind of compact build that suggested she could handle herself.

"It is what it is," the first woman replied. She studied Jonnie with the intensity of someone calculating the odds. "So, who are you, then?" Her hands rested on the wheelchair's armrests, scarred from what looked like old burns.

"Jonnie Villin. Data analyst, Level 5. Was. I saw Project Blue Beam. The northern arrays."

Something shifted in the woman's expression. "The alien hoax?"

"Yeah." Jonnie sagged against a washing machine, exhaustion crashing over him.

The older woman glanced at the younger one. "Robyn, get him out. Take him through the back way along the canal to the Limehouse drop.

"What about you, Suzanne?" Robyn picked up a rucksack and slung it over her shoulder as she spoke.

"I'll sanitise here and create some noise to draw the drones away."

Robyn pulled up her hoodie, then jerked her head towards the back of the laundrette and an exit he hadn't noticed in his exhaustion. "Come on, then. Keep your head down. And try to keep up—I'm not getting nicked because you're knackered."

Outside, the air hit Jonnie like cold water—cleaner than the tunnels, sharper than the recycled atmosphere of his old flat. His lungs ached with it. He glanced back once at the laundrette, but there was nothing to see. The back door had sprung closed behind them, cutting off whatever Suzanne was doing from view. He had to trust that she was doing what she had said she would and was taking a different route to lead the drones away.

Robyn was already twenty paces ahead, moving with the fluid economy of someone who'd learned to navigate hostile territory. Jonnie forced his tired legs to move and rushed to catch up. The canal path was slick with moss and bird droppings. Narrow boats bobbed in the murky water. Robyn moved fast, her trainers barely making a sound on the wet concrete. Jonnie did his best to mimic her.

"So, how'd you end up part of the Resistance?" Jonnie kept his voice to canal-drowned whispers.

"Suzanne found me on the street after I got flagged for not updating my bio profile. I lost access to the Global State App and it spiralled from there." Robyn vaulted over a fallen shopping trolley without breaking her stride. "The system marked me non-compliant. Lost my job, my bank account, my home. I did it deliberately, though, unlike those poor souls who make a simple mistake and lose

everything. Suzanne's cell pulled me off the street before the drones could drag me in for a Psycho-Eval."

"What did you do? Before, I mean?"

She stopped suddenly, forcing Jonnie to windmill his arms to avoid crashing into her. She looked at him with sharp, assessing eyes that seemed to measure exactly how much truth he could handle. "Compliance enforcement," she said flatly. "Blacklist verification unit. I was the one who showed up at your door after the algorithm flagged you. Made sure you understood exactly what you'd lose. I was good at it. Efficient. I told myself I was just doing my job by following the protocols. That someone had to enforce the system, or it would collapse into chaos.

"Then they came for my sister. Rachel. A medical exemption should have protected her—she had an autoimmune condition. Documented and verified. But the algorithm doesn't care about context, just compliance metrics. I watched them drag her into Psycho-Eval while I stood there in my enforcement uniform and did nothing." Her jaw tightened. "I told myself I couldn't risk my clearance, that I couldn't help her if I got flagged too. All the rational justifications." Her lips twisted. "You know how it goes.

"Rachel came out three weeks later, compliant and grateful, but empty. She looked right through me like I was furniture." Robyn's voice stayed level, but her knuckles had gone white where her hands fisted at her sides. "That's when I understood: I hadn't been enforcing order, I'd been enforcing erasure. One person at a time, door to door, making the system's cruelty feel bureaucratic instead of evil."

She looked up, meeting Jonnie's eyes directly. "So, I walked away. I took my knowledge of enforcement protocols, my access to Blacklist databases, and my understanding of exactly how they track non-compliant citizens and went underground. I've been helping people disappear ever since." She smiled bitterly. "Turns out the skills that make you good at hunting people also make you good at hiding them. Just depends which side you're on." She resumed her brisk pace. "We need to keep moving. Come on."

Jonnie had to jog a couple of steps to catch up.

"What happened to Rachel?" Jonnie asked quietly after they'd been walking for a few minutes.

"She's still out there. Still compliant. I can't save her." Robyn's voice had gone flat. "The person she was is gone. But I can make sure the Global State pays in blood."

"And Suzanne? Does she run the Resistance?"

Robyn snorted. "The Resistance. Makes it sound proper organised, that. Suzanne and a few others like her coordinate safe houses and keep people moving. But it's not an army, mate. It's a bunch of scared people trying not to be disappeared or suicided by the Global State."

They passed under a bridge, the echo of their footsteps briefly amplified. Graffiti covered the walls. Among the old tags were new slogans:

RESIST THE LIE. NO DIGITAL CHAINS.

And one that made Jonnie's skin prickle:

THE ORACLE SEES.

"Who's the Oracle?"

Robyn's pace faltered for just a moment. "Dunno. No one does. References to the Oracle started appearing two years ago, almost immediately after the Contact Event. They appeared online, spray-painted on walls, even scratched into bus shelters. Riddles, mostly. But people reckon whoever it is knows things, real things, about what's coming."

"You believe that?"

"I believe there are people out there with information we don't have. Whether they're mystics or just well-connected Resistance, I couldn't tell you." She stopped at a junction where the canal path split. "This way. Through the industrial estate."

They cut through a maze of abandoned warehouses where sheets of corrugated iron flapped in the wind. In the distance, the low hum of a drone made Jonnie's shoulders tense.

"Relax," Robyn said. "That's just a standard patrol. They're not hunting us yet."

"Yet."

"Yeah. Yet."

The Limehouse drop was a three-storey building wedged between a car park and a derelict pub. The ground floor was bricked up, but Robyn led him around the back to a fire escape. They climbed in silence, Jonnie's legs trembling with exhaustion.

The top-floor flat was cramped and dimly lit, the windows covered with black plastic. One main room served as kitchen, living area and sleeping space, with a narrow door leading to what Jonnie assumed was a bathroom. A second door on the far side of the room was probably the front door, given that the one they'd come through led to the fire escape. Sleeping bags were rolled against one wall. A camping stove sat on the counter next to stacks of tinned beans and packets of instant noodles. What little furniture there was looked salvaged from the local dump: a battered sofa with springs poking through worn upholstery, two rickety folding chairs, and a low table covered in papers and maps.

But it was warm. And for the first time in thirteen days, Jonnie felt something close to safe.

The sole occupant of the space was a man seated cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by old books and printed maps. He was in his mid-forties and wore wire-rimmed glasses. He had the slightly dishevelled look of someone who'd forgotten to sleep. His jumper had holes in both elbows. He had looked up when Robyn pushed through the door.

"Got a runner," Robyn announced. "Says he saw data on Blue Beam."

The man stood with a wince, as though stiff from sitting for too long. "Project Blue Beam," he repeated. His accent was unexpectedly posh. "The northern arrays. What data did you see?"

Robyn nodded for Jonnie to go ahead.

"The budget allocation," Jonnie replied. "I'm a data analyst. Was. I spotted a line item about an allocation of fifty billion to atmospheric research infrastructure. But when I traced the contractors, it was all broadcasting equipment, satellite uplinks and holographic transmission arrays. CGI stuff."

The man pushed his glasses up his nose, eyes bright with something between excitement and horror. "I'm Brian Winslow. Historian. Been tracking suppressed records for two years now." He gestured at the papers spread around him. "Come in, come in. Take a seat." He gestured to the uncomfortable-looking couch. Jonnie sat down gingerly, avoiding the worst of the exposed springs. Robyn leaned against the kitchen counter.

"Anyway, as I was saying," Brian resumed, "the official narrative says the Antarctic development is about climate research. But I've found funding trails that

suggest psychological warfare capabilities and mass broadcast technology designed to simulate well, another alien contact."

Jonnie's stomach tightened. "I know. I've got it on USB." He gestured to his boot. "But how do you know?"

Brian knelt back down, shuffling through his papers with quick, precise movements. "I knew the first contact was a hoax. Those ridiculous 'alien messages'." He paused his search long enough to add the air quotes before resuming his rummaging. "The syntax alone was laughable. It was like a release-to-streaming sci-fi movie." He pulled out a yellowed document and tapped it twice. "The question is not *will* we see another phase of their hoax, but *when*? And how many more freedoms will disappear with it?"

"The files I saw say Q3 and Q4 this year. It'll be in phases. They can't risk giving us full-blown aliens in the skies all at once. People will panic and kill themselves, like last time."

"The people who rule us don't care about mass suicides. It's just collateral damage to them. Remember, our so-called leaders are in on this—have been from the start. Don't you remember those world leaders who spoke openly at the United Nations, decades ago, about how it was statistically impossible that we were alone in the universe? How we needed to prepare for ET's eventual arrival? They were laying the groundwork for the big hoax, the 'Contact Event'." Again with the air quotes.

Jonnie wanted to argue, to find the flaw in Brian's logic, but exhaustion had stripped away his ability to pretend. Everything Brian said aligned with the files he'd seen. Everything pointed to a deliberate architecture of global deception.

The door at the front of the flat opened and a beautiful woman entered, followed by a child. The girl looked about seven, pale and thin, with enormous dark green eyes that seemed too old for her face. The second she spotted Jonnie, she clung to the woman's leg, peering at him with obvious fear.

"Jonnie, meet Sarah," Robyn said, nodding to the woman, "and her daughter, Mae. This is Jonnie."

Sarah was striking in an understated way. She appeared to be in her mid-thirties, with auburn hair she wore tied back. She had a quiet confidence about her that immediately put him at ease. She met Jonnie's eyes and offered a small,

tired smile. "You look like shit," Sarah said in a South London accent. "Robyn, where's the first aid kit?"

"I'm alright." Jonnie tried to hide his bloodied hand between the arm of the couch and his thigh.

But Sarah was already moving towards the tiny kitchenette, pulling Mae in her wake. She rummaged under the sink. "You're bleeding all over the furniture." She returned with the kit and knelt next to him, taking his hand without asking permission. Her touch was gentle but efficient.

Mae hovered nearby, watching. "You a runner?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Yeah," Jonnie said, offering the girl a gentle smile. "Had to."

"Mummy says outside isn't safe. She says they take people away."

"Mae," Sarah said quietly, not looking up from cleaning Jonnie's wound, "why don't you go sit with Brian? He's got some new pictures to show you."

The girl drifted away. Sarah's hand tightened fractionally on Jonnie's. "She can't remember life outside this network of safe houses. She never knew real freedom." She paused as she scanned his now clean cut. "You'll need antibiotics to stop further infection. And stitches."

"Are you a nurse?"

"Nah, but I can do an okay job on this." She searched through the first aid kit and pulled out some pain relief tablets and antibiotics, and handed them to him. A second search produced a tube of sanitiser which she used on her own hands before attempting the stitching. He took the meds without water and braced for the needle.

"How long have you been part of the Resistance?" Jonnie asked.

"Two years. I got flagged when I wouldn't consent to the genetic ID health system screening. Or the experimental vaccines. I told them my body, my choice. But the Global State didn't like that. Then they threatened to take Mae away." She stitched the last of four and wrapped gauze around his hand with practised movements. "That was the final straw. Mae was too young to be chipped when I went underground. And the Resistance helped me remove her records from the system. Now, as far as the Global State's concerned, she doesn't exist."

"That's good, though, innit? She's invisible and free, unlike kids in the system with chipped hands, who need facial recognition to enter their schools and homes."

Sarah's eyes met his, and they were hard. "She's seven years old and terrified of being outside. That's not freedom, Jonnie. That's a different kind of cage."

Jonnie looked away, down at his bandaged hand and Sarah's careful work. Her face had been close enough that he could see fine lines of exhaustion around her eyes, but her hands had been steady. He couldn't explain it, but he felt a connection to her, like he'd known her for years. For a second, he had the unnerving sense that if he let himself, he could trust her.

Before he could respond to Sarah, Robyn's phone buzzed. She glanced at the screen and swore. "Suzanne says they've sealed the Shoreditch perimeter. Ahmed's been arrested."

"They'll erase his mind—after extracting information about us," Brian said quietly.

"Ahmed won't break," Robyn insisted, but her tone lacked conviction.

"Everyone breaks eventually. The only question is how long he can hold out," Brian replied.

Jonnie swallowed hard. Ahmed was in trouble because of him. His stupidity. Nobody was looking at him, nobody said anything, but he knew they were all thinking it.

Sarah cleared her throat. "Why don't you get cleaned up?" She pointed towards the bathroom. "You'll find some spare clothes on the shelf next to the shower. I'll make us some food—you look starved. But be careful to keep that hand out of the water. Here," she said, pulling a zip-lock plastic bag out of the first aid kit. She pulled it over his hand and secured it with some surgical tape.

"Thank you." It seemed that nobody was going to blame him for what had happened to Ahmed. Perhaps everybody just considered it the price of trying to defy the Global State.

Showering one-handed was awkward, but it was still the best shower Jonnie had ever had. The spare clothes were old and worn, and didn't fit well, but they did the job. By the time he emerged from the bathroom, he felt like a new man. And the smell coming from the kitchenette made his stomach growl in appreciation. Sarah had made chips—real chips made from real potatoes. He hadn't

eaten real chips in two years. Their taste and texture reminded him of his childhood and the fish and chips he and Joey would buy on the way home from school on Fridays.

Sarah explained that they had a grocer contact in Stratford who left 'damaged' stock in the alley behind his shop and a bakery worker who reported bread as 'spoiled', but bagged it for them to collect. There were farmers outside the 15-minute zones who traded vegetables for information, or for help moving their Blacklisted relatives to safety. It was a shadow economy, built on barter and trust, invisible to the Global State's carbon-tracking algorithms.

"We eat better outside the system than the compliant do within it," Sarah said, shaking her head. "Turns out that real food still exists; you just need to know where to find it."

Jonnie watched her as she talked, sleeves pushed up and hair coming loose. She moved with an ease that made the sparse flat feel almost like a home. It hit him that he'd felt less alone in the last twenty minutes with this stranger and her daughter than he had in months in his compliant, Level-obsessed life.

Sarah pulled out her phone to show Mae something and, for a split second, Jonnie could have sworn he saw two notification icons—one he recognised and one he didn't. The second icon vanished before he could process it, swiped away with practised speed. He definitely didn't miss the small tightening around Sarah's eyes. Or the way she angled the phone away to type something nobody else could see.

"Everything alright?"

"Fine. Just administrative rubbish." She flashed him a warm smile.

"What kind of administrative rubbish?" Did he imagine her smile slipping for a second? "Oh, I don't mean to pry, sorry."

"No, that's okay. I have a job. Nothing big. I do some bookkeeping for a small business. Part-time. The Resistance helped me get some new papers so that I can remain semi on the grid. Not all of us are completely underground."

"That makes sense." Jonnie popped another chip in his mouth and chewed. "So, what happens next?" He directed his question to the room in general.

Robyn turned from the window. "Now we wait for Suzanne's signal. If Ahmed breaks—"

"When," Brian interrupted.

Robyn shot Brian a dirty look, but she didn't correct him. "We'll know. Suzanne has someone inside the Psycho-Eval centre. We'll have maybe an hour to scatter before they roll up every safe house Ahmed knows about."

"Why don't we just go now?" Jonnie asked.

Before Robyn could answer, an old-fashioned ringtone blared out. Brian fumbled in his pocket for his phone. "Yeah?" He listened, brows scrunching together. "Right. Yeah, I understand. I'll tell them." He lowered the phone slowly. "That was one of Suzanne's contacts. There's someone else who wants in. A drone operator. Says he's got intel on hunt protocols. And he wants out of the system."

Robyn's expression hardened. "Piss off with that. It's a trap."

"Maybe. But Suzanne's contact has vouched for him. Says he's been feeding her information for weeks. His name's Desmond Fernsby."

"Fernsby?" Robyn's voice was sharp. "He's the one who tracked the Bethnal Green cell last month. Five people got scooped up because of that bastard."

"Yeah, but you know how it goes. He had to follow orders. But now he says he's done. Wants us to help him get out," Brian replied.

Sarah stayed quiet as Robyn and Brian argued. Robyn continued to insist it was a setup, but Brian wanted to at least hear Fernsby out. Jonnie felt it best to stay out of it. His exhaustion had reached the point where everything felt slightly unreal, like watching himself from outside his body.

Mae had drifted closer again, standing just within arm's reach. She studied him with her too-old gaze. "Are you scared?" she asked.

"Yeah, love. Proper terrified."

She nodded, as if this confirmed something she'd already known. "The Oracle says fear is truth trying to teach us something."

"The Oracle?" Jonnie glanced at Sarah, who shrugged.

"Mae hears things," Sarah said. "I honestly have no idea how. It's like she gets messages that have been left for us, but in the weirdest places—places we wouldn't think to look if not for her."

"What kind of messages?"

"Little riddles, warnings. The last one said, 'The hunter becomes the hunted when he sees through his own scope'. Stuff like that."

Jonnie looked at Mae's serious little face. "What do you think it means?"

"Someone's changed their mind," Mae said. "Someone's started running."

Jonnie looked at Sarah, who shrugged again. "I didn't say she explained what she hears."

Time seemed to drag while they waited for news. Jonnie was getting antsy. He didn't know how the others could be so calm. Mae was sitting cross-legged on the floor next to Jonnie, drawing with stubby pencils on the back of old flyers. She was working with intense focus, tongue between her teeth, completely absorbed. To distract himself, he crouched down beside her. "What are you drawing, love?"

Mae held up a picture without looking at him. "The lady with two faces." The drawing showed a woman with red hair. It was a simple drawing, typical of a child her age, except that it had two heads: one face smiling, the other crying. And one faced left, while the other faced right.

"That's an interesting picture," Jonnie said carefully. "Is it someone you know?"

"Mummy." Mae went back to colouring, pressing hard with a red pencil around the crying face. "The Oracle says some people have to wear masks for so long they forget which face is real."

Jonnie glanced across the room to where Sarah was helping with supplies, laughing at something Robyn had said. "Your mum's not wearing a mask, Mae."

Mae looked up at him. "Everyone wears a mask. That's how you stay safe." She reached for a new piece of paper and started drawing again.

Talking to Mae was deeply unsettling. At times, she sounded like a fully-grown adult. At others, she sounded even younger than her seven years. He pushed up off the floor and sat back on the old sofa.

In the corner, Robyn's phone buzzed again. She read the message and sighed. She did not look happy. "That was Suzanne. She says to bring Fernsby in. Tomorrow night, canal drop near Victoria Park." She sought out Jonnie's eyes. "And she says you're going with me. She wants your read on whether he's legit."

"Me? Why me?"

"Because you've burned up your whole life to go on the run. Suzanne thinks that if anyone can spot a traitor faking it, it's you."

Jonnie's exhaustion made everything feel distant. He desperately wanted to sleep, but he forced himself to focus. A drone operator wanting to defect was either the real deal, or the most obvious trap in history. And somehow, after thirteen

days in the tunnels, he was supposed to have the judgment to tell the difference. He thought of Ahmed and how many safe houses were going to have to be rolled up because a single link in the chain broke.

Somewhere above, a helicopter passed overhead. It wasn't close, but it still made everyone freeze. Jonnie didn't unlock his muscles for a full minute after the sound faded into the city's constant background hum. He realised everyone was looking at him, awaiting his answer. "Okay, I'll go. But if this Fernsby's playing us, we need an exit plan."

"We always need an exit plan," Robyn said. "Making sure we always have one is the only way we're still breathing."

Jonnie leaned back against the sofa, closing his eyes. Someone's hand squeezed his shoulder. "Get some rest. You look like you're about to keel over." Sarah. She was right. The adrenaline had burned away, taking the last dregs of his energy with it. Even the dull throb of his mutilated hand couldn't keep him awake any longer. Jonnie let himself sink into the sofa's sagging cushions, lulled by Robyn and Brian's low voices.

His last uneasy thought before sleep took him was that the trap was already set and they were all waiting for it to spring.

Chapter 7

The Hunter

Something dead was floating in the canal next to the towpath, bloated and unidentifiable.

Jonnie pulled his new hoodie up against the chill, watching his breath mist in the air. Robyn crouched beside him behind a stack of rotting pallets, her hand resting on something in her jacket pocket. Gun or knife, he couldn't tell.

"He's late," Jonnie whispered.

"Or he's not coming." Robyn's eyes never stopped moving, scanning the dark water, the bridge ahead and the buildings crowding the canal on both sides. "Or maybe we're about to be nicked. Could be they're setting up a perimeter right now, getting ready to launch the drones."

"Cheerful, aren't you?"

"I'm realistic. You've been underground what? Two weeks? I've been running for six months. Optimism's a good way to end up in a Psycho-Eval chair. Or worse."

Jonnie wondered, absurdly, what Sarah would say about meeting a defecting drone operator in the dark alongside a canal. Probably something cutting about men and their death-wish heroics—before quietly checking the exit routes and making sure Mae was nowhere near the blast radius.

Jonnie's hand itched beneath the bandage. He scratched at it absently. He'd spent the day in the Limehouse flat listening to Brian explain his research in exhaustive detail. The historian's work was impressive. He'd tracked centuries of manipulated history, looking at patterns of manufactured crises. His evidence suggested that covert deep state structures all over the world—the origins of the

Global State—had been planning Project Blue Beam for decades. Project Blue Beam was their way out of the shadows; the mechanism by which the covert became overt rulers. Jonnie had handed over the USB stick, which had made Brian light up like Christmas had come early.

A sound pulled him back to the present. He could hear footsteps on the towpath, measured and deliberate. Robyn's hand tightened on whatever she was holding.

A figure emerged from beneath the bridge. Male, maybe six feet tall, wearing a dark jacket with the collar turned up. He walked like someone expecting trouble, with his weight forward on his toes, ready to move.

"That him?" Robyn didn't answer, but she started to stand up from her crouch. Jonnie grabbed her arm. "Wait. If he's setting us up, showing ourselves now is stupid. Let him come closer. Make him sweat."

Robyn glanced at him, reassessing. "Alright. Your call."

She dropped back onto her haunches. Jonnie's heart hammered. He hadn't actually expected Robyn to follow his lead. He didn't know if he'd made the right call, but sitting in that flat all day listening to Brian's theories had made one thing clear: passivity got you killed.

When the man was closer, Jonnie nodded at Robyn and the two of them stood slowly, keeping the pallets between them and the approaching figure.

He stopped ten feet away, hands visible and empty. His eyes flicked between the two of them before settling on Robyn. "You're Robyn. Suzanne said you'd be here."

"And you're Fernsby. The drone operator who tracked the Bethnal Green cell."

"I followed orders." His voice was rough, with a hard East London accent. "Did what they told me. Same as you would've done."

"I'd never hunt my own," Robyn retorted.

"They weren't your people then, were they? They were targets. Numbers on a screen." Fernsby took a step closer and Robyn's hand came out of her pocket holding a short, well-used blade. He stopped immediately, raising his palms. "Easy. I'm not armed. Couldn't risk 'em tracking my service weapon."

"Why are you here, then?" Jonnie asked, stepping out from behind the pallets. "What changed?"

Fernsby's eyes flicked to him, assessing. "You're Villin, the data analyst. They've got your file flagged priority. I helped you escape by diverting the drones 'round the checkpoint. Whole surveillance network's hunting you."

"I didn't ask about me. I asked what changed for you."

Fernsby looked away over the water. He swallowed. "I tracked someone four weeks back. A woman in her mid-twenties, flagged for non-compliance. She'd refused a biometric update, same as thousands of others. I put a drone on her, called in her location. I followed protocol." He paused, jaw working like the words were hard to find.

"Go on," Robyn said, knife still held at the ready.

"She was in Psycho-Eval for six days. When they released her, she wasn't the same. I saw the footage—they wiped her. Complete personality restructure. She went in fighting, came out compliant. Smiling. Thanking 'em for their support."

"That's the Global State," Jonnie said quietly. "That's what they always do."

"Yeah, well " Fernsby shook his head. "I watched her. After. Tracked her on my own time, not official like. She went back to her flat, sat on her sofa and stared at the wall for hours. Didn't eat, didn't sleep. Just sat there with that smile on her face. Was proper creepy like." His hands had curled into fists. "Next morning, she reported to her assigned work placement. A perfect model citizen. But she was dead behind the eyes."

Robyn lowered the knife fractionally. "And *that* broke you?"

"I don't buy it. " Jonnie stepped forward, voice harder than he'd intended. "You've tracked hundreds of people, helped erase God knows how many minds, but this one woman was different somehow? I call bullshit."

Fernsby's jaw tightened. "Believe what you want."

"I don't believe you. I don't think you suddenly grew a conscience. I think you're here because you're scared. You're scared they'll come for you next, scared you're on the wrong side of history, scared you'll end up in one of those chairs yourself." Jonnie's hand throbbed beneath the bandage. "So don't stand there acting like you're some hero. You're just another rat leaving the ship."

The silence stretched. Fernsby didn't flinch. "You're right. I'm scared. But that doesn't make my intel less real." He paused. "What happened woke me up. I started looking at other cases of people I'd tracked, people I'd helped get disappeared.

Murdered. Followed up on as many as I could. It was always the same pattern. They're not evaluating people—they're erasing their minds and personalities. It's like they're trying to build a compliant hivemind to replace individual thinking citizens."

"So, you want redemption? Want to feel better about yourself?"

Fernsby's eyes hardened. "I want to stop it. There's a difference."

A car door slammed somewhere near the far end of the canal, the sound echoing unnaturally loud across the water. Robyn motioned them back into the shadows. They waited, pressed against cold brick, while two figures passed on the street above. Drunk, laughing, oblivious. The sound faded.

"What intel you got, then?" Robyn asked when they were alone again. "Suzanne said you had hunt protocols."

Fernsby reached slowly into his jacket, pulling out a folded stack of papers. "It was a risk printing these. Hunt protocols, facial recognition algorithms, the locations of safe houses they're monitoring. And I think you'll find this useful." He shuffled to a page at the bottom of the stack. "The deployment schedules for the northern arrays. They're accelerating the timeline."

"How do you know about that? It's classified Level 5 only." Jonnie took the papers, unfolding them. Even in the dim light from distant streetlamps, he could make out the official headers and classification stamps. They were real Global State documents, not fakes.

"Some members of the military know about the alien hoax."

"So, you knew all along and stayed compliant? How can you live with yourself?" Robyn took two threatening steps towards Fernsby, knife once again raised.

Fernsby didn't step back. "I've done worse. I'm not proud of it." He dropped his head as though waiting for Robyn to make a move.

"When's the final phase coming?" Jonnie asked quickly, trying to distract Robyn and diffuse the situation.

"In about two months. They're testing broadcast capabilities now, along with psych impact assessments. Once they've tweaked the CGI holographic and drone tech, they'll stage the final alien contact. I haven't seen details, but I guess they'll

start with atmospheric anomalies and stuff. More alien messages. Build up to seeing the aliens themselves and not just ships."

"And everyone will believe it," Robyn said bitterly, lowering her blade. "Because why would the Global State lie about something that big?"

"If the lie's big enough, people will believe it. I did." Jonnie added.

"Not everyone. There's resistance—you're proof of that. At first, the cells were small and scattered, so they weren't much of a threat. More an inconvenience. But someone's trying to coordinate and share information. Calls themself the Oracle."

Jonnie and Robyn exchanged glances. "You've heard of them?"

"Everyone in surveillance has heard of 'em. Whoever it is has really got the higher-ups irritated because they can't track 'em. Messages appear in places they shouldn't be able to access. Encrypted drops that bypass monitoring. We've tried to trace 'em for months. It's like they're a ghost."

"Or they know the system inside out," Jonnie mused. "Someone with high-level access who knows exactly how to avoid detection."

"Maybe." Fernsby moved closer, lowering his voice. "Look, I know you don't trust me—I wouldn't either. But I've got skills you need. I can teach you how to move without triggering facial rec, how to spot drone surveillance patterns. I can show you where the blind spots are in their systems. And I've got one more thing."

"What's that?"

"I know where they're holding your mate. The one from the curry shop."

Jonnie went very still. "Ahmed?"

"Yeah. He's in the Victoria Psycho-Eval centre on sub-level three. They're processing him slow like, trying to torture all the intel out of him before they wipe him clean. But he won't last long. You've got maybe forty-eight hours before he's done."

Jonnie's mind raced. Forty-eight hours. Ahmed, who'd given him a key and a chance when he had nothing. But it was suicide. The Psycho-Eval centres were fortresses. There'd be surveillance everywhere. Although

"Let's get him out"

Fernsby blinked. "What?"

"You know the layout of the place, right? Security rotations, surveillance blind spots and all that stuff? And you know where he's been kept. We go in, we get

him out."

"That's insane," Fernsby said flatly. "It's a military-grade facility. You'd need a team, equipment, weeks of planning—"

"We've got forty-eight hours and you. That'll have to be enough." Jonnie turned to Robyn. "Suzanne will help us."

"No, she won't. We all know the risks; if we get caught, that's it. That's the price we pay."

"Then I'll do it myself."

"You can't just make a decision about this. We need to take this back to Suzanne and let her decide." Robyn stared Jonnie down.

"Ah, yeah, you also need to know that they've planned raids for midnight tomorrow," Fernsby interrupted their staring match. "They're gonna hit four safe house locations simultaneously: Limehouse, Bethnal Green, Hackney and the old library in Stratford. Suzanne's network will be gutted. She needs to move her people."

"Bollocks," Robyn hissed. "How would you know that if you've turned traitor?"

"Because I'm still logged into the system, right? I haven't removed my chip." He held up his left hand so they could see for themselves. "I requested extended leave —told them I needed a voluntary Psycho-Eval on mental health grounds. Bought myself seventy-two hours before they notice I'm gone. I can still access mission briefings and stuff without suspicion. Trust me, the intel's solid."

"We need to evacuate," Robyn agreed. "Now." She was already pulling out her phone. "I'm calling Suzanne."

"Not on that," Fernsby said sharply. "They monitor all signals in flagged areas. You make a call from here and you'll have drones on us in minutes."

"Then how—" Jonnie asked.

"Dead drop," Fernsby replied. "There's one in Victoria Park under the east bridge. Leave a message and Suzanne's people will find it within the hour."

Robyn looked at Jonnie. "You believe him?"

Jonnie studied Fernsby. Every instinct screamed trap, but they couldn't afford to ignore him. Sarah and Mae were in Limehouse. And if there was even a chance of rescuing Ahmed "Yeah," Jonnie said slowly. "I believe him."

Robyn's eyes widened. "Jonnie—"

"I'm not asking you to trust him. I'm saying I do. If I'm wrong, it's on me. But we can't just keep hiding and hoping. Not anymore."

Robyn stared at him for a long moment, then exhaled sharply. "Alright. Your call. But if we're walking into a raid tomorrow because of this—"

"Then it's my fault." Jonnie met Fernsby's eyes. "And I'll own it." He studied Fernsby. "I believe he knows things we need. Whether that makes him trustworthy " He shrugged. "We're all just trying to stay safe, yeah? Sometimes that's enough."

Fernsby's shoulders dropped fractionally, like he'd been holding his breath.

"Right," Robyn said. "We split up. I'll go to the Victoria Park dead drop and leave a message for Suzanne. Then I'll go back to Limehouse and warn them to move. You two go to ground. We'll meet at the secondary location."

"What secondary location?" Jonnie asked.

"The one I'm about to leave in the dead drop." She was already moving, switchblade disappearing back into her pocket. "Fernsby, if this is a trap, if there's a single drone waiting for us—"

"Then I'm dead too," he finished. "I'm all in now. No going back."

Robyn disappeared into the shadows along the towpath, moving with the practised silence of someone who'd learned to be invisible. Jonnie and Fernsby were left standing in the cold, the dead thing in the water bumping softly against the concrete. Jonnie's chest tightened. He'd just vouched for a drone operator. He was trusting a man who'd hunted people like him for months. Suzanne hadn't authorised this. Brian would've wanted more proof. Sarah would've called him reckless.

But they weren't here.

"The woman," Jonnie said after a moment. "The one they wiped. What was her name?"

Fernsby was quiet for so long that Jonnie thought he wouldn't answer. "Jenny Brennan. She was a primary school teacher before all of it." His voice was barely audible. "She had a little girl. Pretty little thing. Six years old. I watched the kid visit her after the mindwipe. Mum didn't recognise her."

"Christ."

Fernsby turned to face him fully. "You asked what changed for me. That's what changed. I could justify a lot of things—surveillance for security, detention for public safety, even the intimidation. But watching that little girl cry because her mum didn't know who she was " He shook his head. "There's a line. They crossed it."

Somewhere in the distance, a siren wailed. They both tensed, waiting to see if it would get closer. It faded away towards the city centre. "We should move," Fernsby said.

"Where to?"

"There's a safe place in Bow. Old community centre that's been abandoned for years. We can wait there until Robyn makes contact."

They walked in silence along the canal, sticking to the shadows. Jonnie's hand throbbed with each step. He wondered if the antibiotics were working, or if another infection was setting in. Wondered if it would matter; if he'd have time to care.

"I saw your family on TV after you bolted the checkpoint. Have you spoken to them?" Fernsby asked as they climbed up to street level, emerging between a vape emporium and a betting shop, both shuttered for the night.

"I couldn't risk it. My family should've been left alone by now. I hope they have been." He paused. "We were close-knit, before I ran. The Global State indoctrination to destroy the family unit didn't work on us. God only knows what they think of me now. Do you have family?"

"My mum's in Essex. Thinks I'm doing important work for our security." Fernsby's laugh was bitter. "Proud of me, she is. Tells all her mates her son's keeping them safe."

"Maybe you will be," Jonnie said. "Eventually."

"Maybe. Or maybe we're all doomed and we're just pretending we've got a chance."

They walked through empty streets, past boarded-up shops and flickering streetlights through a city that felt more like a prison with each passing hour. Above them, invisible in the dark, drones hummed their endless noisy patrols.

At the community centre, Fernsby forced open a back window and they climbed inside. The place smelled of mildew and pigeon droppings. Old posters

advertising dance classes and kids' football tournaments clung to the walls, relics of a time before everything got weaponised. They settled in to wait, backs against opposite walls, watching each other with the cautious wariness of animals who weren't sure if they were allies or enemies.

"Tomorrow," Fernsby said into the darkness, "after they evacuate. What then?"

"We figure out how to stop Global State from broadcasting more fake alien shit," Jonnie replied. "We expose the lot."

"That's suicide. You know that, yeah?"

"Probably. But what's the alternative? Let them reshape reality further? Let them erase everyone who remembers what truth looks like?"

Fernsby was quiet. Then, "My mum's gonna be gutted when she finds out I've defected. Although she won't see it that way; she'll just hear that I've been Blacklisted."

"Yeah," Jonnie said. "They don't understand. Not yet. But what we're doing is for them. It's for all of them. We're going to figure out how to bring the whole thing down and give them back their freedom."

"That's gonna get us killed."

"Maybe. But I'm done surviving. I'm ready to fight back." It was the first time he'd said it out loud. The first time he'd meant it.

He'd spent two years enforcing their system, then two weeks running from it. Now he was going to burn it down. Or die trying.

Chapter 8

The Scatter

Jonnie woke with a start, grabbing his bandaged hand before he registered where he was. His eyes found Sarah, then Mae, and his expression softened. "You made it."

"For now." Sarah smiled at him.

The old community centre looked worse in daylight. Graffiti covered every surface. Most of the windows were smashed and the ceiling sagged from water damage. "What time is it?" Jonnie asked, pushing himself up into a seated position.

"A little after seven," Robyn answered.

"I assume Suzanne got your message then?"

"Yeah. Limehouse has been evacuated. I assume the others have been, too. Suzanne is arranging a new central location where we can all meet up. I'm waiting to hear back from her with details."

Jonnie nodded. "Have you met Fernsby?" he asked Sarah, gesturing to where the man stood guard at a window.

"Hello," Fernsby nodded, barely turning from his surveillance.

"This is Sarah and Mae."

Mae buried her face in Sarah's arm. "It's alright," Sarah said quietly. "He's with us. He's safe."

"He smells like them," Mae whispered, loud enough for everyone to hear. "Like the bad men."

Fernsby's face tightened, but he didn't respond. He went back to watching the street.

"Where's Brian?" Jonnie asked, rubbing his good hand over his face. He'd kill for a cup of coffee right now.

"He took the archives and went ahead." Sarah helped Mae take off a coat that was too big for her. "Said something about needing to reach Billy. Wouldn't explain."

"Billy's still on the inside, isn't he?" Jonnie asked. "How does he plan on reaching him? Don't we have to wait until Billy reaches us?"

Sarah shrugged. "What's the plan?"

"Wait for Suzanne's signal. Then move to wherever she's designated," Robyn answered.

"That's not a plan. That's hope dressed up as strategy," Sarah rolled her eyes.

Robyn pulled a bottle of water and a pack of biscuits from her rucksack and offered them to Mae. The girl took them with a whispered thanks, never taking her eyes off Fernsby. "Sarah has a point," she said. "We can't just scatter and regroup. The Global State's accelerating everything—the raids, Psycho-Evals, the timeline for Blue Beam. We need to do more than just survive."

"I know." Jonnie pushed himself to his feet. "But how? We're a handful of people with no resources, no weapons, no access to anything that matters. What exactly can we do?"

"We expose 'em, like you said," Fernsby spoke without turning from the window. "The alien hoax. We get the evidence out before they can launch the next phase."

"To whom?" Sarah's voice was sharp. "The media's controlled. The internet is monitored and censored. Every communication channel is filtered through the Global State algorithms. Who exactly are we exposing them to? How?"

"Ordinary citizens who don't know the lies or what's coming," Fernsby answered.

"The people don't want to know. They want their compliance ratings, their social scores. They want their digital credits and their nice, comfortable lies. You think they'll believe us over the Global State?"

Fernsby finally turned, meeting Sarah's eyes. "Some will. Enough will. That's all we need, innit?"

"That's naive." Sarah rolled her eyes again.

"Maybe. But I've spent months hunting people who refused to comply with the system. They keep popping up, no matter how many we detain. The Resistance isn't organised, but it's persistent. That counts for something, right?"

Mae was eating the biscuits slowly and methodically, watching the adults argue with her too-old expression. Jonnie realised he'd moved closer to Sarah, not quite touching her. He spoke up, "Fernsby says Ahmed's in the Victoria evaluation centre. Says we've got maybe a day before they finish him."

Sarah went very still. "Finish him?"

"Yeah."

The silence that followed was heavy with implications. Outside, a siren wailed past, making Mae flinch. Sarah's hand found the girl's shoulder and squeezed.

"I still don't like this," Robyn said. "I know you think you can get in, I know it's Ahmed, but—"

"I can get us in." Fernsby's voice was matter of fact. "Like Jonnie said yesterday, I've got access codes, security rotations, camera blind spots. It's doable."

"It's suicide," Sarah corrected.

"Probably. But he's one of yours, innit? If you leave people behind, what's the point of any of this?"

"There's another option," Sarah offered, pushing her hair behind her ear. "If they're processing him slowly, trying to get intel out of him, we could offer a trade."

"Trade what?" Robyn asked. "We've got nothing they want."

"We've got Fernsby—a drone operator gone rogue. They'll want him back."

Fernsby laughed, bitter and sharp. "Yeah, they'll want me back, all right. In pieces. I'm a liability they'll erase the second they get their hands on me."

"Then we can use you as bait, make them think they're getting a defector. Set up an exchange—fake, of course—and grab Ahmed in the confusion. Then we all scatter," Jonnie suggested.

"Excuse me if I don't like being bait in this scenario," Fernsby replied.

Mae had finished the biscuits. She approached Jonnie slowly, cautiously, like approaching a nervous animal. "The Oracle left a message," she said, her voice barely above a whisper, but everyone stopped talking.

"What message?" Jonnie asked, crouching to her level.

"On the wall outside. It's new. I saw it when we came in."

Robyn was already moving, crossing to the broken door. She stepped outside, scanning the graffiti-covered exterior. Then she stopped, staring at something eye-level on the brick. "Bloody hell," she breathed.

The others crowded around. There, scratched into the brick with something sharp, fresh enough that dust still clung to the grooves:

THE CAGE IS THE FEAR OF WHAT LIES BEYOND. THE KEEPER HOLDS THE KEY, BUT THE LOCK IS WITHIN.

Below it, smaller, almost an afterthought:

VICTORIA. SUB-LEVEL THREE. A GHOST WALKS.

Jonnie felt his skin prickle. "How did they know we'd be here? We only decided on this location last night."

"It always knows," Mae said. "The Oracle sees everything."

"Or someone's been tracking us," Sarah said, pulling Mae back inside. "This could be a trap."

"Or it's genuine Resistance intel." Fernsby studied the message, his expression unreadable. "A Ghost walks. That's surveillance speak, innit? It means someone's moving through the system without leaving digital footprints."

"Someone like you?" Robyn asked.

"Maybe. Or someone else on the inside who knows what they're doing." He turned to face them. "If this is real, someone's giving us a window."

Jonnie's mind was racing, trying to assemble pieces that didn't quite fit. The Oracle's message, Fernsby's intel, the raids, Ahmed in sub-level three. It felt choreographed, like they were being moved around a chessboard by an invisible player. "We need to talk to Suzanne, find out how this message got here," Jonnie said.

"No safe signal here," Robyn replied, checking her phone. "She'll make contact when it's safe."

A new sound cut through the morning—low, rhythmic, mechanical. Everyone froze. "Drone," Fernsby said, moving back from the window. "That's a standard patrol pattern, not targeted. But they're expanding the search grid." They pressed against the interior walls, away from the windows. The sound grew louder, then began to fade.

Robyn exhaled slowly. "We can't stay here much longer."

"Agreed." Sarah held Mae's hand. "We need to move before proper daylight. It will be harder to track us in crowds."

"Where to?" Jonnie asked.

"There's a place," Sarah said. "Old factory in Leyton. Been empty for years, but the structure's sound. Used it before."

"It's on the surveillance grid," Fernsby warned.

"Everything's on the surveillance grid," Sarah countered. "The question is whether they're actively monitoring it. And I don't see why they would be—it's empty."

The muscles in Fernsby's jaw clenched, but then he nodded. They gathered their minimal belongings. Mae insisted on carrying the biscuit wrapper, folding it carefully and putting it in her coat pocket as if it was precious.

"What about tonight?" Jonnie asked as they prepared to leave. "The message. Victoria centre. When are we going for Ahmed?"

No one answered immediately. The question hung in the cold air, heavy with consequences. Finally, Robyn spoke. "You're right, we can't just leave him there. If they finish him, his mind's gone. And that's a fate worse than death."

"Then we go in and get him out if we can. We have to at least try. We can go in late, when they're likely to have minimal security on duty."

"We need a proper plan," Fernsby insisted. "Not some half-arsed rescue attempt. I can get us in there, but getting out with a detainee—that's bloody harder."

"Then we'd better start planning. He saved me." Jonnie checked the street through a crack in the door. Empty for now, but dawn was breaking properly, the yellow light staining everything. "If we aim for ten tonight, that gives us at least twelve hours to figure it out."

Fernsby was already sketching the layout from memory on scrap paper—quick, efficient lines showing corridors and exits. "West fire exit. I know the pattern. Guard rotation, alarms. Sub-level three is deep," he continued. "Reinforced corridors, controlled access, detention cells designed to be impenetrable from both the inside and outside. But they're not expecting rescue because no one's ever been bloody stupid enough to try, innit?"

"Until now," Jonnie said.

"Until now." Fernsby's smile was grim. "Twelve hours. Let's go. The sooner we get to Leyton, the sooner we can get some rest—because we'll need it. Tonight, we find out if brave and stupid are actually the same thing."

They slipped out one by one. Sarah and Mae first, then Robyn, then Fernsby, with Jonnie at the rear. The Oracle's message remained scratched in the brick wall, visible to anyone who looked closely enough.

A GHOST WALKS.

Jonnie touched the words briefly, feeling the rough grooves. Someone had been here in the night, someone who knew where they'd be. Someone in the Resistance who was trying to help, or someone from the Global State setting the most elaborate trap imaginable.

Jonnie turned from the wall. Twelve hours. Long enough to plan a miracle escape or a funeral.

Chapter 9

The Ghost

The underground car park's fluorescent tubes flickered overhead, casting everything in sterile white light. Jonnie pressed his back against the concrete pillar, counting heartbeats. Beside him, Fernsby was checking the cloned access cards one final time, his hands steady despite what they were about to do.

"We won't need hand chips with these top-tier access cards," Fernsby whispered, nodding towards the service entrance. "Two guards. Standard rotation. They'll verify our access cards, pat us down and wave us through. You're a data courier, I'm your escort. Keep your mouth shut and let me talk, right?"

"And if they want to scan me?"

"Then we run like hell."

Jonnie's hand throbbed beneath the bandage. He flexed his fingers, checking his grip.

"Ready?" Fernsby asked.

"No. But let's go anyway."

They walked towards the entrance with the measured confidence of people who belonged there. The guards looked up. Both were young, wearing the dead-eyed expressions born of routine. One gestured them forward, holding out a scanner. Fernsby handed over both cards. The scanner beeped green. "Purpose?" the guard asked, not looking at them.

"Data transfer, sub-level archive." Fernsby's voice had taken on a flat, official tone. "Priority classification."

"Arms out."

They submitted to the pat-down. The guard's hands were professional and quick. He found nothing. They'd left everything behind except the clothes on their backs—standard issue, official jumpsuits—and the fake credentials in their pockets. "Through there. Left corridor, lift at the end. You've got twenty minutes on those passes."

"Understood."

They walked through and Jonnie felt his lungs start working again. Behind them, the guards had already forgotten their faces, returning to their phones and their boredom. "Stage one," Fernsby murmured as they reached the lift. "Now it gets difficult."

The lift descended with a mechanical whine, numbers counting down: -1 -2 -3. The doors opened onto a corridor painted that institutional greyish-green that existed nowhere in nature. The red lights of surveillance cameras blinked steadily from every corner. "Blind spots," Fernsby said, pointing. "Here, here and there. Stay close to the walls and only move during the camera sweeps. We'll have three minutes from the moment I trigger the disruption."

"Three minutes to find Ahmed, unlock his cell, get back to the lift, and get back upstairs," Jonnie confirmed shakily.

"Yeah. Bit tight, I know."

They moved along the corridor, timing their movements to the camera rotations. Fernsby stopped at a maintenance panel, prying it open with fingers that knew exactly where to press. Inside, a nest of wires and circuit boards pulsed with small green lights.

"This is it," he said. "Once I disconnect these, the cameras will loop their last sixty seconds of footage. But the central AI will register a system malfunction after three minutes and will trigger a full facility lockdown. When that happens, nothing opens without manual override from upstairs."

"For God's sake, just do it."

Fernsby pulled three wires in quick succession. The control panel began emitting an angry beeping noise, but other than that, no alarms seemed to have been triggered.

They ran.

Sub-level three was a maze of identical doors; each marked with a number and a status light. Most glowed red, indicating they were occupied. Fernsby scanned the numbers, moving fast. "Twenty-two, twenty-three here: twenty-four."

The door was reinforced steel with a small observation window. Jonnie looked through it and saw Ahmed sitting on a metal bench with his hands in his lap, staring at a screen. His face was slack, his eyes empty. For a terrible moment, Jonnie thought they were too late. Then Ahmed's eyes tracked towards the window and something sparked. Recognition. Hope. Fear.

Fernsby swiped the cloned card and the door hissed open. Jonnie stepped through first, Fernsby close behind with the card still warm in his hand.

The room was smaller and brighter than Jonnie had imagined. With its white walls, white floor and white ceiling, it felt sterile and cold. The harsh light ensured that every shadow, every possible refuge, was eliminated. Ahmed was strapped to a chair in the centre of the room. Thick nylon bands were strapped across his chest, wrists, ankles and forehead. His eyes were open but unfocused, the pupils blown wide. A thin line of drool tracked down his chin. Electrodes covered his scalp like a grotesque crown, wires trailing to a terminal that pulsed with soft blue light.

"Jesus Christ," Jonnie breathed, hands already working at the restraints. "Ahmed? Ahmed, mate, can you hear me?"

Ahmed's lips moved, but he made no sounds.

The terminal screen in front of the chair displayed text of questions and responses, logged with clinical precision:

Q: Location of primary safe house?

A: Limehouse. Top floor flat. East side of building. Fire escape access.

Q: Network coordinator identity?

A: Suzanne Kellerman. Wheelchair user. Former civil servant. Age approximately 60.

Q: Additional Resistance contacts?

A: Robyn Chester. Sarah Sallow. Brian Winslow. Jonnie Villin.

"They pulled everything out of him," Jonnie said, voice hollow. "Everything."

Fernsby was studying the equipment with professional detachment. "It's a neural override system, innit? It bypasses your conscious resistance. When they ask

a question, it stimulates the memory centres directly and extracts the answer whether the subject wants to give it or not." He pointed to a series of graphs on a secondary monitor. "See that? Synaptic activity mapping. They're not just interrogating him, they're cataloguing which neural pathways activate when he accesses specific information."

"Why?"

"So they know what to erase."

Ahmed's eyes flickered and his focus returned briefly—enough to recognise Jonnie's face. "Jonnie? That really you?"

"Yeah, it's me. Come on, mate. We're getting you out." Jonnie put an arm around Ahmed's shoulders and helped him to his feet.

Ahmed stood slowly, like his body was remembering how. He stumbled forwards, legs uncertain. "They did things. To my head. Made me tell them "

"Tell them what?"

"Everything. The safe houses, the names. I tried not to, Jonnie. I swear I tried. But they had this this thing. Made it impossible to lie."

"It's alright, mate. We knew you'd have to talk. Everyone does. We scattered, yeah? Everyone's moved. They're safe, don't worry."

They got him into the corridor just as a high-pitched alarm started blaring out somewhere above them. "That's not the three-minute warning," Fernsby said, his voice tight. "That's the breach alarm. Someone knows we're here."

"How?"

"Dunno, but we need to move fast."

They ran back towards the lift, half dragging Ahmed between them. The cameras were still looping, but Jonnie could hear boots thumping on concrete as guards responded to the alarm.

The lift doors stood open ahead. Thirty feet. Twenty.

A guard rounded the corner behind them, shouting for them to stop. No time to be subtle. They put on a burst of speed, dragging Ahmed forward. Jonnie slammed the lift button. The doors began their agonisingly slow close. The guard aimed a taser. The prongs flew towards them. They struck the lift's metal frame, sparked and died. The doors sealed shut. The lift shuddered upward.

"They'll be waiting for us at the top," Fernsby said, breathing hard. "The underground entrance will be sealed. We need to exit through the main lobby."

"That's insane!"

"It's the only option."

The lift climbed. Ahmed was leaning heavily against the wall, his eyes unfocused. "I told them about the Leyton factory. This morning, during interrogation. If you're using it—"

"We were, but we've moved. It's okay," Jonnie assured him.

The lift reached the ground level. The doors opened onto chaos.

The main lobby was full of people despite the late hour—citizens being processed, guards moving between stations, screens everywhere flashing faces and compliance ratings. Fernsby pulled them left, away from the main desk and towards a side corridor marked "Authorised Personnel Only".

"Walk normally. Look bored. You're data couriers finishing a job, right?"

They moved through the crowd, three men among dozens, doing their best to appear unremarkable and forgettable. Jonnie kept his head down, watching Ahmed's feet to make sure he didn't stumble.

Almost to the exit. Ten feet. Five.

"Stop right there." A woman's voice, sharp with authority.

They stopped. Jonnie's heart hammered against his ribs. The woman approached. She was in her late forties, wearing a supervisor's uniform. She had the kind of face that looked like it had forgotten how to smile. She was staring at Ahmed. "This man's in for processing. Why is he mobile?"

Fernsby didn't miss a beat. "Transfer order came through twenty minutes ago. He's being relocated to the Stratford facility for stage two evaluation."

"I don't have that in my system."

"Check again. Priority classification, direct from central command."

The woman pulled out a tablet. Her frown deepened. "There's no—"

Fernsby's hand shot out, striking her throat with a precise blow that dropped her without a sound. The tablet clattered to the floor. "Run!"

They burst through the exit into the cold night air. Behind them, shouts erupted and alarms shrieked—the entire centre was mobilising in reaction to the threat.

Robyn appeared from the shadows like a wraith. "Heard the alarm go off. This way!" She led them through an alley, then another, then a cut-through that opened onto a residential street. A nondescript van sat idling at the curb with its side door open. "Get in!"

They piled inside. The driver didn't look back and didn't speak. He pulled into traffic the moment the door slid shut. Behind them, sirens wailed in overlapping frequencies—close enough to make the driver flinch, but distant enough that they might, just might, slip through the net tightening around them.

Suzanne sat on a bench seat inside the van, her grey-streaked hair loose around her shoulders. Her wheelchair was folded in the back. She looked at Ahmed with the expression of someone calculating the costs. "You told them everything."

Ahmed's face crumpled. "I couldn't stop. They had this—"

"I know what they had. It's fine. We evacuated."

"How did you know?" Ahmed asked.

"Because the Oracle told us you'd break. Sent word this afternoon that Ahmed's resistance would fail by 20.00. We moved everyone out earlier." She leaned forward. "The Oracle's been right about everything so far. That's the only reason we're all still breathing."

Robyn turned suddenly, grabbing Ahmed's arm. "We need to remove his tracking chip."

"I never had one." Ahmed held up both hands, checking for any evidence of an implant.

Fernsby pulled out his scanner and swept it over each of Ahmed's hands until the device shrieked. "Well, you have one now," he said, voice tight. The tension, which had been slowly lowering as they drove away from the wailing sirens, suddenly ratcheted up again.

Ahmed looked down at his left hand, turning it slowly in the van's dim light. Between his thumb and forefinger, barely visible beneath the skin, was a small ridge. He pressed it and grimaced when he clearly felt something beneath his flesh. "They must have installed it during my Psycho-Eval," he said quietly, his voice distant. "Part of the reconditioning protocol. I I didn't remember until now. They made me forget."

"Christ," Robyn breathed. "We've been carrying a tracking beacon for two minutes. That's all they need."

"Not necessarily," Fernsby countered, checking his scanner's readings. "The chip's passive—it only broadcasts when queried by nearby receivers. It hasn't started tracking yet, thank Christ. I've just disabled it with my scanner. We should be okay until we get somewhere safe and can remove it."

Jonnie felt sick. "It has to come out," he said flatly. "Now. What if your scanner failed?"

Ahmed nodded, although his hands started trembling. "Yes, please take it out."

The occupants of the van looked at each other. They were academics, hackers, analysts. Not surgeons. "I removed mine with my pocketknife," Jonnie offered, holding up his bandaged hand.

"I'll do it." Robyn produced her switchblade. "I've done field first aid before."

Ahmed extended his hand, steadying it with visible effort. "Do it. Just make it quick." He braced himself as Robyn sterilised his hand and her blade using the last of their antiseptic. Fernsby positioned his scanner to locate the chip precisely, marking the spot with a pen. "This is going to hurt," Robyn warned. "We've got no anaesthetic, nothing to numb the pain. You need to stay *very* still regardless."

"I've been through Psycho-Eval," Ahmed said, his voice hollow. "They ripped thoughts out of my brain. You're just removing a chip. I'll manage."

Jonnie knelt on the floor of the van beside him, offering his shoulder for support. "Squeeze as hard as you need. I know that pain."

Ahmed's attempt at a smile failed halfway. "Appreciated."

Robyn positioned the knife, taking a breath to steady herself. Fernsby held up a torch to provide better light. Robyn's blade was sharp, and she cut clean and shallow, parting the skin in a line approximately an inch long. Blood welled immediately, streaming down Ahmed's hand. He gasped, but didn't pull away. "I see it," she muttered, using the tip of the blade to probe the wound. "Little bastard's embedded pretty deep. Hold tight."

She worked carefully, widening the incision slightly and using the blade to lever the chip from the surrounding tissue. Ahmed's breathing had gone ragged. Sweat beaded on his forehead despite the early morning chill. Jonnie felt bones grinding in his shoulder. "Almost there," Robyn said. "Just need to got it."

The chip came free with a wet plopping sound. The tiny piece of technology, coated in blood and tissue, was no larger than a grain of rice. Robyn dropped it onto the van floor and Jonnie immediately crushed it beneath his boot. The chip was dead.

"Clean cut," Robyn assessed, already applying pressure to stop the bleeding. She had limited bandages in her rucksack, but she wrapped Ahmed's hand efficiently, securing the dressing with practised knots. "You'll want proper stitches when we reach the new safehouse, but this'll hold for now."

Ahmed stared at his bandaged hand, flexing his fingers slowly. "It's gone? They can't track me anymore?"

"Not through that chip, anyway," Fernsby assured him. "But the damage is done. They know a lot more about us now, and that's going to help 'em narrow their search parameters significantly."

"Then we move fast and stay unpredictable," Suzanne decided. "We'll change locations every twelve hours if necessary. And vary our routes. We assume every step is being watched."

Ahmed sat up, leaning heavily on Jonnie for support. His face had paled from the pain, but his eyes held new clarity. Something about the chip's removal—literally cutting out the Global State's intrusion into his body—had restored a piece of agency he'd lost in the Psycho-Eval chair. "Thank you," he said to Robyn, "for not hesitating." She nodded.

The van turned north, weaving through back streets. "Where're we headed?" Jonnie asked.

"New safe house," Suzanne answered. "With a quick stop to pick up Sarah and Mae."

Five minutes later, the van turned down a dark alley. Sarah and her daughter emerged from a shadowy doorway and Jonnie slid open the van's door to let them in. "Thank you," Sarah said quietly, sitting next to Jonnie, "for getting him out. Ahmed's been with us from the start. One of the good ones."

"We couldn't leave him there," Jonnie replied.

"Most people would've. Would've thought it safer to cut their losses and keep moving. But you're not most people, are you?" She touched his hand and smoothed her fingers over his bandage.

Jonnie shook off her implied praise. "I'm just someone who got unlucky enough to see the truth."

"That's not unlucky. That's chosen. You could've looked away—most do. But you didn't. You're braver than you think you are." She squeezed his fingers gently, careful not to press his injury.

At the front of the van, Robyn and Fernsby were planning their next steps. Ahmed had his head in his hands, silent. Suzanne was on her phone, typing rapidly. Sarah leaned closer to Jonnie, her voice dropping to barely a whisper. "When this is over, when we've exposed the lie, when Mae can finally walk outside freely, what then? What do you want?"

Jonnie looked at her—really looked. Auburn hair escaping its tie; fine lines around her eyes that spoke of years underground; careful strength that came from protecting someone smaller than yourself. He wanted desperately to reach up and smooth the lines in her forehead, but he kept his hands still. "Something normal," he replied instead. "Something peaceful. Maybe a place where kids can play outside again."

Sarah's smile was small and sad. "Yeah. That'd be nice."

"So, this new safe house what's the deal?" Fernsby asked.

"It's in an old industrial estate in Enfield. Used to be a print shop before the Global State digitised everything," Suzanne answered. "It's safe—multiple exits, good sight lines. It's where Brian's set up the archives."

"The archives—that's your evidence? Your way to expose Blue Beam?" Fernsby asked.

"Part of it. Brian's got historical records, budget documents, suppressed news reports—everything that proves the Global State's been planning this for decades. But we need more than documents. We need access."

"Access to what?"

"The central broadcast system. The arrays they're building to project the next alien hoax. We need to hijack them and use their own infrastructure to tell the truth."

Robyn laughed, sharp and bitter. "You're talking about hacking into the most secure system on the planet. With what? We've got no tech, no expertise—"

"We've got Jonnie. As a data analyst, he knows the protocols, knows the architecture," Suzanne said.

All eyes turned to him. Jonnie felt his mouth go dry. "I was a budget analyst. I don't know anything about tech."

"But you know data. You understand how it flows through the Global State's networks."

"Understanding and hacking are different things entirely."

"Then you'll learn," Suzanne shrugged one shoulder. "And you'll have Ahmed to help you—he's quite the hacker."

"Is that still true?" Robyn asked quietly, casting a quick look at where Ahmed was staring off into space, oblivious to their conversation.

Suzanne flicked her eyes in Ahmed's direction. "I suppose time will tell. But we've got two months before they broadcast the next hoax. That gives us time to figure out how to hijack their broadcast and expose the truth before they can reshape reality. Again."

The van hit a pothole, jostling everyone. Mae stirred, but didn't wake. Sarah's hand remained in Jonnie's, her pulse steady against his wrist.

"Two months." Suzanne was putting a lot of faith in his abilities. "And if we fail?"

"Then everyone continues to believe the lie. Fake aliens appear in real-time and the Global State has the perfect crisis to justify absolute control. No more resistance, no more dissent. Just compliance and fear and the slow death of independent thought."

"So no pressure then."

"None at all," Suzanne replied firmly.

The van turned into an industrial estate, buildings hulking dark against the sky. The driver pulled into a loading bay and killed the engine.

"We're here. Everyone out, quickly. We've got maybe an hour before they adjust their search grid. Robyn, can you help me with my chair, please?"

The print shop stank of ink and mildew. Decades-old printing presses loomed like industrial corpses, their metal bones rusted and seized.

Brian was inside, surrounded by papers, USBs, laptops and the accumulated evidence of decades of Global State manipulation. He stood up as they entered.

"Ahmed! You made it out!" Brian squeezed his shoulder.

Ahmed flinched at the touch—a full-body recoil like Brian had struck him. His wide eyes, pupils blown, darted around the room as if he couldn't quite process where he was. Real. Not real. The distinction seemed to elude him. "Barely." Ahmed's voice cracked on the word. He sank onto a folding chair, the movement uncoordinated like his body had forgotten how his limbs worked. Tears rolled down his cheeks. His head dropped into his hands.

"They carved my mind open," he whispered, the words muffled against his palms. "The chair—it wasn't just questions. It was inside. Like fingers pulling apart my thoughts and sorting through memories I didn't even know I had." His breath hitched. "Every safehouse. Every name. I tried God, I tried to hold on, but they just kept digging."

His hands were trembling violently now, the fresh bandage around his palm already seeping blood. He stared at it like he didn't recognise his own hand. "I gave them Suzanne's location. The Limehouse flat. The canal routes. I told them about you, about Robyn, about—" His voice broke completely. "I couldn't stop. They'd ask and the answers would just come. Like they were pulling strings and I was just just "

"A puppet," Fernsby said quietly from the corner, his face grim. "Neural override protocols. They bypass conscious resistance. It's not your fault."

Ahmed's head snapped up, his eyes finding Fernsby with sudden, feral focus. "You! You're one of them!" His other hand went to his pocket, fumbling for something, but his fingers were too unsteady.

"Ahmed, he's with us," Jonnie said quickly, kneeling beside him. "He helped get you out, remember?"

"With us?" Ahmed's laugh was broken glass. "There is no *us* anymore. I destroyed it. Everything Suzanne built, everyone she protected—I handed it to them on a platter." Fresh tears spilled over. "Mae. Sarah. They're going to come for them because of me."

"We evacuated them," Robyn said, stepping forward. "They're here. Safe. No one got taken."

Ahmed stared at her, the information seeming to take several seconds to penetrate the fog of trauma. "Safe?"

"Safe," Jonnie confirmed. "You held out long enough. Gave us time to move." He pointed to where Sarah was settling Mae on a makeshift bed in the corner, tucking a blanket around her small form. Ahmed's face crumpled. A sob tore from his chest, raw and animal. His whole body shook with it.

Brian gripped his shoulder again, firmer this time. "It's alright, Ahmed. You're out. You made it."

"I'm not I'm not the same." Ahmed's voice was small and childlike. "I can still feel them in there. Like they left something behind. I don't I can't trust my own thoughts anymore."

"That fades," Fernsby said, although his voice carried no conviction. "The disorientation. Give it time."

Ahmed looked at him with hollow eyes. "How would you know?"

"I've seen the after effects, right? People who've been through it."

"And how many of them recovered?" Ahmed asked. Silence. "That's what I thought."

Jonnie felt his chest tighten. This was what the Global State did. They didn't just erase you; they left you doubting every thought, every memory, every piece of yourself that remained.

"You'll be alright, my friend. You can help us expose all of it." Brian's voice was gentler now, more careful. He gestured at the archives spread around him. "This is everything. Blue Beam's blueprint, budget allocations, contractor records, the consequences of that lie, the lot." He paused, turning to face the room fully. "They made the world compliant with the alien hoax to solidify their plans for global governance. And behind those lies, they unleashed a nightmare. Millions who disbelieved have been murdered, millions who feared aliens took their own lives, and entire countries have been dragged into darkness and ruin. If we can get this out, if we can prove what they've done "

Ahmed reached out to steady one of the stacks of evidence, fingertips lingering as if physically claiming the fight.

"We will," Jonnie said, with more confidence than he felt. "We'll find a way."

Sarah joined them, having gotten Mae to sleep. Jonnie envied the child's ability to shake off her fear and find rest simply because she found comfort in her mother's presence. Sarah knelt next to Ahmed. "I need to stitch your hand, love."

Robyn handed her a first aid kit and she began unwrapping his temporary bandage, preparing to stitch up his cut.

As she worked, she glanced back at Jonnie, watching him through the shadows. He caught her looking when he glanced up from where he was hunched over the laptop and gave her a tired smile. After the last stitch, Sarah stood and made her way towards Jonnie. Everyone had retreated to their own corners, doing their best to give each other some space. Fernsby stood guard at the entrance, while Robyn dozed with one eye cracked. Ahmed sat motionless on a chair. Suzanne had finally allowed herself to sleep in her wheelchair, head tilted back at an angle that looked uncomfortable.

Jonnie looked up as she approached and reached for her hand before she'd even finished sitting. His fingers found hers with the kind of automatic certainty that shouldn't exist between people who hardly knew each other. He held onto her almost desperately—like she was the only solid thing in a world that had dissolved into chaos. He traced the ridge of her knuckles with his thumb and was pleased to see a faint flush rise in Sarah's cheeks. "When this—" He had to stop to clear his throat. He was so tired. "When this is over and we've exposed the lie, when Mae can run outside under clear skies what happens to me and you?"

He could see he'd caught Sarah off guard. His eyes searched hers. She didn't answer immediately. Then she whispered one word. "Jonnie."

He tightened his fingers around hers. "I know it's mad. We barely know each other. But when you stitched my hand, when you let me get close to Mae, when you—" He stopped, his mouth suddenly dry. He swallowed convulsively. "You make me feel like I'm still human. Not a number in the system. Just Jonnie."

Sarah brought his hand to her mouth and kissed his knuckles. He raised his other hand to her face and brushed a thumb tenderly across her cheekbone. "This is real. I feel you," he whispered. He pulled her closer, wanting desperately to hold her. Wanting to show her that he meant what he said.

And yet, he didn't kiss her. Not now. Not yet.

But they held each other in the darkness of the derelict print shop, two people who had been brought together by fragile and dangerous circumstances.

Chapter 10

The Unblinking Eye

"We need a watch rotation," Suzanne announced the next morning. "Six-hour shifts, two people per shift. No one alone, no one without backup."

"I'll take first watch," Fernsby offered.

"With me," Robyn said immediately.

Fernsby nodded. "Fine. Let's establish patrol routes."

They moved to the far end of the print shop, voices dropping as they discussed tactics. Jonnie watched Ahmed try to piece together the archives Brian had spread across a workbench. The hacker's hands were shaking, papers rustling with each tremor. "You alright, mate?" Jonnie asked, moving closer.

Ahmed didn't look up. "I keep seeing it. That room. White walls, white light, white noise that burrows into your skull. You can't fight it. Your mouth just opens and the truth comes out."

"It wasn't your fault."

"Wasn't it?" Ahmed finally met his eyes. The shame in them was raw. "What if someone's in a room like that right now because I couldn't keep my mouth shut?"

Jonnie had no answer for that. The guilt would eat Ahmed alive, or it would harden into something useful. Either way, it was his to carry.

Brian appeared from behind a stack of archive boxes, his wire-rimmed glasses smudged with dust. "Ahmed, I need you to look at these." He spread a series of documents across the workbench. "Budget allocations from the last three years. Do these tracking codes mean anything to you?"

Ahmed leaned in, squinting at the numbers. The distraction seemed to steady him. "These are internal routing codes. They show where money moved between

departments." His finger traced a column. "This one is Project Blue Beam, like you said. But this one " He tapped his finger on a number. "This looks like a secondary allocation. There's a different coding structure."

"Can you trace it?"

"Maybe. Give me time." Ahmed pulled the laptop closer, fingers moving across the keyboard with increasing confidence.

Jonnie drifted away towards Sarah and Mae. The child was awake now, sitting up and staring at the wall with her unnerving intensity. "She's been like this for ten minutes," Sarah murmured. "Won't talk, won't look at me. Just staring."

"Mae, love," Jonnie said gently, crouching beside her. "What are you seeing?"

Mae's voice came out flat and distant. "The Oracle left another message."

Everyone stopped.

"Where?" Suzanne asked, wheeling closer.

"On the wall. Behind the press. In the dust." Mae pointed without looking. "It says the eye never blinks, but sometimes it looks away."

Jonnie stood up and walked over to where she'd indicated. There, traced in the thick dust coating one of the printing presses, was a message:

THE EYE NEVER BLINKS, BUT SOMETIMES IT LOOKS AWAY. WHEN IT DOES, THE GHOST MUST RUN. COUNTDOWN: 5 DAYS.

"Five days," Brian breathed. "Five days until what?"

"Until they come for us," Robyn said. "Has to be. The Oracle's warning us we've got five days before they raid this location."

"Or five days until Blue Beam goes live," Fernsby countered. "Could be about the arrays, not about us."

"How the hell did someone get in here to write this?" Robyn was already checking every entrance, every window. "We've been on watch all night."

"The Oracle finds a way," Mae said.

Sarah pulled her daughter close, but her eyes were scanning the message. "Maybe the Oracle's not what we think. Maybe it's not helping us."

"It warned us about Limehouse," Suzanne said. "Got us out before the raid."

"Or it knew about the raid because it's part of the system," Sarah pressed. "Ever wonder why the Oracle's always right? Why it knows things before they happen?"

Jonnie found himself defending the Oracle, although he didn't know why. "Because someone inside's feeding it information. Someone with high-level access who's trying to help."

"Or someone who's playing us. Leading us exactly where the Global State wants us to go," Sarah pushed.

The silence that followed was uneasy. Mae had pressed herself against Sarah's side, thumb in her mouth, watching the adults argue.

"We can't afford more paranoia," Suzanne said finally. "The Oracle's information has kept us alive. Until that changes, we trust it." Robyn shook her head in disgust, but didn't say anything.

"Five days. If that's real—if they're coming for us in five days—we need to accelerate everything. The exposure, all of it," Fernsby said over his shoulder as he made his way back to his post next to the window.

"We're not ready," Ahmed said, still focused on the laptop. "I'm barely halfway through tracing these allocations. And Jonnie hasn't even started on the broadcast protocols."

"Then we work faster," Suzanne said.

Jonnie felt the weight of expectation settle on his shoulders. "I need to understand the system first. How the arrays communicate, what protocols they use, where the security gaps are. That takes time."

"Time, we don't have." Suzanne rolled away, her movements stiff with exhaustion. "We now know they've been planning Blue Beam for decades. Building the infrastructure, conditioning the public, creating the perfect crisis. Suppressing any resistance. You know what they announced yesterday?"

"We've been underground. What announcement?"

"Meetings with the aliens."

"Christ," Jonnie breathed.

"They're accelerating," Brian deduced. "The timeline's moving faster than we thought. That's what the five days is about. They must be planning another broadcast. The news about meetings with the aliens is them laying the groundwork for it. We've got to be ready to go as soon as we know the exact time."

Ahmed swore, sharp and sudden. Everyone turned. "Found it. The secondary allocation I was tracing." His face had paled. "It's a massive budget for 'perception

management and reality engineering'. Started five years ago and has been scaling up every quarter since."

"Reality engineering," Jonnie repeated. "What's that mean?"

"Means they weren't just planning to fake alien contact. They're planning to warp how people perceive reality itself."

Brian swore under his breath. "They'll make people believe the alien ships have always been there, effectively rewriting collective memory."

Jonnie felt his stomach turn. "That's not possible. You can't change what people remember."

"You can if you control all information flow. Have you heard of the Mandela Effect? You take every news source, every social media feed, every entertainment channel and basically flood the system with the new narrative. It drowns out the old one and, within weeks, people will swear they remember seeing signs of an alien presence their whole lives. That's how the Mandela Effect works at scale."

"Why's it called the Mandela Effect?" Robyn asked.

Suzanne pulled her wheelchair closer to the table. "Because people over sixty, like me, remember that Nelson Mandela died in jail in the eighties. But, years later, the establishment fooled everyone and brought him back into the public eye as a long-jailed resistance fighter. He became the South African leader. Nobody younger than me remembered his previous demise. They wiped all evidence off the internet. Some people had archived it and tried to show proof, but without much success. It fell on deaf ears."

"That's how they script things. It's how tyrants come to power and how genocides start," Sarah said, her voice barely audible. Mae had fallen asleep against her, her small face peaceful despite everything. "You make people forget. Then make them believe a new story about their world."

Jonnie found himself moving closer to Sarah without deciding to. He sat on the floor beside her and pressed his shoulder against hers. "How do you do it?" he asked quietly. "Raise a kid in this? Keep her safe when the whole world's weaponised against us?"

"You don't keep her safe. You teach her to survive." Sarah's fingers traced Mae's hairline. "She's only seven, but she can identify drone surveillance patterns. She

knows which streets have facial recognition, which don't. She's never tasted strawberries or played outside, but she can disappear in a crowd like a ghost."

"That's not a childhood." He reached for Sarah's hand.

"No, it's not. But it's the best parenting I can give her—how to survive what's coming."

Their eyes met, and something passed between them. Not just attraction, although Jonnie felt that like a physical pull. Recognition, maybe, of their shared exhaustion, shared determination and shared grief for the world that should have been.

"Five days," Jonnie said into the quiet. "We've got five days to crack the most secure broadcast system on the planet and expose a decades-long conspiracy."

"Yeah," Sarah replied, her thumb tracing circles on his palm. "Easy, innit?"

He laughed, surprised by it. Around them, the others were returning to their work—Ahmed and Brian hunched over documents, Robyn and Fernsby establishing patrol routes with pointed silence, Suzanne typing rapidly on her laptop. The Resistance, such as it was. A handful of exhausted people in a derelict print shop, planning to topple a global empire with nothing but archived documents and desperate hope.

Sarah's hand tightened on Jonnie's and he let himself believe, just for a moment, that this could work. That they could win.

Chapter 11

The Virus in the Memory

The laptop screen cast Ahmed's face in harsh blue light, making him look skeletal. He'd been staring at the same line of code for twenty minutes, not blinking, barely breathing. Jonnie watched his finger hover over the keyboard, trembling like it had forgotten which key to press. "Ahmed, mate. You need a break."

"No. No, I'm fine. Just need to " Ahmed's finger stabbed down, hitting three keys simultaneously. The screen flickered. He swore, backspaced and tried again. Same result. His breathing accelerated. "I can't. I can't make my hand It's not doing what I tell it to. Fuck!" Ahmed slammed his palm against the table, hard enough to make the laptop jump. "Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

The sudden violence startled everyone. Mae flinched behind Robyn.

Ahmed shoved the laptop away, sending it skidding across the table. His hands went to his head, fingers digging into his scalp as if he could physically pull the damage out. "It's right there. I can *see* the code in my head, but when I try to type it, my fingers just they just stop. Like there's a wall between my brain and my hands." Tears of frustration were streaming down his face. He wiped at them roughly, like he was ashamed of them.

"It's alright, mate. Step away for a minute, yeah?" Jonnie suggested, gently.

"It's not alright!" Ahmed's voice cracked completely. He was shouting now, all the careful control he'd been maintaining for days finally shattering. "I used to be *good* at this! I could trace routes through twelve proxy servers blindfolded. I could break encryption in my sleep. I could hack anything. And now I can't even type a basic function without my brain shutting down!"

He grabbed the laptop, pulled it back and tried again. His fingers hovered, shaking, waiting for the connection between thought and action that wouldn't come. "Come on," he whispered to his own hands, voice breaking. "Come on, please. Just work. Just do what I'm telling you. *Please*."

Nothing. His finger twitched. Pressed the wrong key. The screen threw an error.

Ahmed made a sound—half sob, half scream—and swept the laptop off the table entirely. It hit the concrete floor with a crack, the screen splintering.

"They took it," Ahmed said, voice now small and defeated. "They took the part of me that could fight back. Left me with hands that won't obey and a mind full of static. I'm useless. I'm fucking *useless*." He was crying openly now, shoulders shaking, not bothering to hide it.

In the Global State's world, emotion was flagged. Tears were non-compliant. Anger meant a Psycho-Eval. They'd socially engineered humanity to swallow their feelings and always present a calm, unbreakable faзade. But Ahmed was breaking. Publicly. Messily. And it was the most human thing Jonnie had seen in months.

Across the workbench, Brian had looked up from the documents he'd been cataloguing. His eyes behind the wire-rimmed glasses were sharp with concern. "It's the neural restructuring. The Psycho-Eval doesn't just extract information—it rewrites cognitive patterns. It makes compliance easier and resistance harder."

"I *know* what it does." Ahmed's hands had curled into white-knuckled fists. His voice was hoarse from shouting. "I can *feel* it, like something crawling around inside my skull, rearranging things while I sleep. I reach for a memory—how to encrypt a file, how to trace a data route—and it's just *gone*. Or it's there, but I can't access it." He pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes, trying to stop the tears that wouldn't stop coming.

"It's the complex code of my brain," Ahmed muttered. "The networks. The digital pathways. That's what they targeted. I can still remember my mum's address. I can still do basic arithmetic. But every time I try to hold the pattern of a data route or a decryption algorithm in my head, it dissolves. It's like trying to grab smoke."

He dropped his hands and looked at Jonnie with red-rimmed, desperate eyes. "They made me stupid. They took the only thing I was good at and carved it out

like a tumour."

"You're not stupid," Jonnie said firmly. "You're injured. There's a difference."

"Is there?" Ahmed's laugh was bitter. "If I can't think properly, can't trust my own mind, can't do the one thing I trained my whole life to do, then what's the difference between that and being fundamentally changed? At what point am I not Ahmed anymore? At what point am I just a person-shaped shell they sent back to you?" His voice dropped to a whisper. "What if I'm already gone and I just don't know it yet?"

Jonnie moved closer, keeping his voice steady. "What do you remember clearly? What's still sharp?"

Ahmed pressed his eyes shut, forcing the words out. "The room," he said finally, voice flat. "White walls. Chrome fixtures. The smell of disinfectant and something else—something chemical, medicinal. The chair. The straps on my wrists." His breathing hitched. "The questions. Every single word they asked. Every single answer I gave. That's all crystal clear. Perfect recall. High definition. Like they burned it into my brain with acid."

He looked up at Jonnie and his expression was haunted. "I can tell you the exact tone in the interrogator's voice when he asked about Suzanne. I can describe the way the overhead light flickered when I gave up the Limehouse location. I remember the feeling of my own mouth moving, my own voice betraying people I love. I remember that I couldn't stop it. That's what they left me with. Perfect memory of my own betrayal. But ask me to write a simple decryption algorithm?" He gestured at the broken laptop on the floor. "Nothing."

"That's the point," Brian said, adjusting his glasses. "Punishment through memory. The Global State doesn't just want compliance—they want you to participate in your own psychological torture. Keep replaying your betrayal until it defines you."

"Brian," Jonnie warned.

"No, he's right." Ahmed's voice rose again, anger flaring back to life. "They took the useful parts—the skills, the knowledge, the ability to fight back—and left me with the guilt. Left me broken enough that I can't help, but functional enough that I know exactly how broken I am."

He stood abruptly, knocking his chair backwards. It clattered across the concrete. "And you know what the worst part is? I'm *angry*. I'm so fucking angry I can barely breathe. But anger's non-compliant. Shouting's a red flag. Breaking things gets you flagged for evaluation. They trained me to swallow it, smile, display calm. And I can't. I *won't*!" He kicked the broken laptop, sending it skittering across the floor. "I'm angry and I'm scared and I'm *human*, and they can't have that. They want empty shells. Compliant drones. Well, *fuck 'em*!"

The outburst echoed around the warehouse. Mae had pressed herself against Sarah's leg, wide-eyed. But she wasn't crying. She watched Ahmed like she recognised something—perhaps his raw emotion and uncensored humanity.

Robyn stepped inside, having completed a perimeter patrol. "Ahmed's having another episode?" she asked quietly, but not unkindly.

"He's fine. Just needs some rest," Jonnie replied.

"Rest won't fix what they did to him. They carved out pieces of his brain and replaced them with compliance protocols. That's not something you sleep off."

Robyn hadn't spoken loudly, but sound carried in the large industrial space. Jonnie winced when Ahmed laughed—a sound utterly devoid of humour. "Finally. Someone who'll just say it instead of tiptoeing around like I'm made of glass." He turned to face Robyn, chin lifted as tears still streaked his face. "You're right. I'm broken. They broke me. But I'm still *me*. Still angry. Still fighting. And as long as I can feel *this*—" He pressed his palm against his chest, over his heart. "—they didn't win. Compliance is calm. Compliance is empty. I'm a fucking *mess*. That means I'm still human."

"Are you?" Robyn's challenge wasn't cruel, just factual. "Can you be certain that any thought you have is really yours? Or is it what they programmed you to think?"

"Robyn, that's enough," Jonnie said, putting himself between them.

"I'm asking a legitimate question. Ahmed went into the Psycho-Eval centre as one person and came out as something else. We don't know what protocols they've implanted. They could have programmed him to report back to them."

"I'm not reporting anything!" Ahmed's voice rose, echoing off the metal printing presses. "I'm not a fucking spy!"

"You don't know that and that's the point. They're so far inside your head, you wouldn't even know if you were."

The silence that followed was suffocating. Ahmed's face had gone white, and his breathing was rapid and shallow. Mae had pressed herself against the wall, her hands balled up against her chest. It looked like she was clutching something tightly, protecting it.

Sarah emerged from the back room, displaying perfect timing. She assessed the situation at a glance. "Ahmed, love. Look at me." She waited until his eyes found hers. "You're having a panic attack. That's your body responding to stress, not compliance programming. Can you breathe with me? In for four, hold for four, out for four." She demonstrated with exaggerated movements of her chest. Ahmed tried to follow, gasping, failing. Sarah took his hands and placed them on her own ribcage so he could feel the rhythm. "There you go. Match me. Four counts." Slowly, painfully, Ahmed's breathing steadied. The colour started returning to his face. Sarah didn't let go until his hands had stopped trembling. "Better?" she asked.

"Yeah. Thanks."

Jonnie watched Sarah ride out the storm without flinching. The Global State had weaponised calm in all the wrong ways—manufactured neutrality, dead eyes, Psycho-Eval smiles—but what she did was the opposite. But Sarah she was kindness and empathy and human contact. Dangerous, he thought, how much he wanted to lean on that steadiness himself.

Ahmed looked at Robyn with something like defiance flickering in his expression. "I'm not compromised. I'm just damaged. There's a difference."

Robyn's face was unreadable. "Hope you're right, mate. For all our sakes." She took up a guard post at the window, switching places with Fernsby and leaving an uncomfortable silence in her wake. Fernsby slipped out the door for a perimeter check.

Mae crept forward. She held out a piece of paper to Ahmed, tightly folded into squares. "What's this, love?" he asked, taking it gently.

"The Oracle left it. Under my blanket. I don't know when."

Ahmed unfolded the paper with shaking hands. On it, in precise handwriting that looked computer-generated:

THE VIRUS IS THE SYSTEM. WHAT THEY TOOK FROM YOU, THEY REPLACED WITH CERTAINTY. CERTAINTY IS THE ENEMY OF TRUTH. QUESTION EVERYTHING, ESPECIALLY YOURSELF. COUNTDOWN: 115 HOURS.

Ahmed read it three times, his lips moving silently. Then he crumpled it in his fist. "A hundred and fifteen hours to go before we expose the lie."

"Or it's telling Ahmed he's compromised," Robyn called from across the room. "Warning us about a mole in our midst and that we have a hundred and fifteen hours until we all get hauled out of here and down to the Psycho-Eval centres."

"It's not about me," Ahmed said, but his voice lacked conviction. "It can't be."

Jonnie took the crumpled paper, smoothing it out on the workbench. "It's about all of us. Question everything, especially yourself. That applies to everyone here."

"Including the Oracle," Sarah reminded them. "If we're questioning everything, shouldn't we question the mysterious entity that keeps leaving us convenient messages?"

Brian frowned. "The Oracle's been accurate so far."

"Accurate enough to keep us moving. Keep us destabilised. Never quite enough information to act on, just enough to keep us afraid. What if the Oracle isn't Resistance? What if it's another form of control?"

Jonnie found himself wanting to defend the Oracle, but there was some logic to what Sarah said. The messages were always cryptic and always arrived at psychologically opportune moments. And they were always just vague enough to justify any interpretation.

"This does give us something to act on, though," he said. "Now we have a specific time, assuming this refers to the next Global State broadcast. A hundred and fifteen hours from now is 15.00 five days from now. That doesn't leave us much time to get ready. Brian, what have we got that's concrete?"

The historian gestured to the spread of documents covering the workbench—printouts, photographs and copied files spanning decades. "It's comprehensive. We have historical documentation of the lie."

"But is it compelling? Will ordinary people look at budget allocations and believe us about the Global State media propaganda?"

"Probably not," Brian admitted. "We need something visceral. Something that can't be explained away."

"Like what?"

"Visual evidence of the broadcast infrastructure. Or emails, memos and planning documents that explicitly reference a hoax."

Ahmed had been listening, his eyes darting between speakers like he was struggling to follow the thread. "The secondary allocation I found. The reality engineering budget. If we can trace that to specific operations—"

"Can you?" Jonnie asked.

Ahmed stared at the laptop screen, that same paralysis settling over him. "I I should be able to. It's basic stuff. Hack the routing codes, cross-reference with department allocations, build the network map. I've done it a hundred times."

Fernsby's voice came from the loading bay entrance. "Philosophical debate's all well and good, right, but we've got a practical problem. I've been monitoring security chatter. The Global State's ramping up drone patrols across this sector. They're tightening the grid."

"Because of us?" Suzanne asked.

"Can't tell. It could be standard escalation, or it could be they know we're here and they're closing the net slowly. I think we should move again, just to be safe, like."

"Better safe than sorry. I'll start looking for our next safe house," Suzanne said.

Jonnie turned back to the archives, feeling the weight of impossible expectations. Find more evidence, crack the broadcast system, and expose a decades-long planned conspiracy. With a team consisting of a traumatised, part-time hacker and curry shop owner, a paranoid knife fighter, a guilty drone operator, an exhausted coordinator, an obsessive historian, a woman with a seven-year-old child, and himself—a data analyst who'd stumbled into the Resistance through an accidental discovery. They were screwed.

"Right," Jonnie said, forcing confidence he didn't feel. "Brian, walk me through what you've got. Everything. Ahmed, you rest. When you're ready, I'll need you to verify stuff I don't understand."

"I'll try," Ahmed said. "Can't promise my brain will cooperate." It didn't. Twenty minutes later, Ahmed was leaning over Brian's shoulder, squinting at a procurement document. "This contractor " Ahmed's finger traced the line, then stopped. His brow furrowed. "This contractor... They're... They do the " He trailed

off, finger still on the page, mouth slightly open. Searching for words that wouldn't come.

"Satellite components," Brian supplied gently.

"Right. Yes. Satellite." Ahmed blinked, nodded too many times. "I knew that. I was about to say that." But his eyes said otherwise. He stepped back and rubbed his face hard with both hands.

An hour in, Ahmed picked up a pen to make notes. He stared at it in his hand, turning the pen over as if he'd never seen one before. "How do you " He pressed the tip to paper. Nothing. He clicked the top. Clicked it again. "Why isn't it " Jonnie reached over, gently took the pen, clicked the top and showed him it was already ready to write. "Oh." Ahmed's voice was small. "Right. Yeah. I knew that."

He took the pen back and tried to write. His hand moved in jerky, childish strokes. The letters were malformed, the spacing irregular. He wrote three words, then stopped and stared at what he'd produced. "That's not that doesn't look right." His handwriting had been neat and efficient, but this looked like a child's first attempts at writing the alphabet. "Fuck." He dropped the pen as if it had burned him. "Fuck, I can't even write properly anymore."

Two hours in, Brian was explaining a budget trail. He spoke slowly and carefully, watching Ahmed's face for signs of comprehension. "So, the shell company routes funds through—"

"Through the subsidiary to NASA and then the Knights of Malta, then back through a trust in the Caymans," Ahmed finished, eyes bright. "Classic money laundering pattern. They did the same thing with the healthcare procurement scandal in 2020."

Relief flooded Brian's face. "Exactly. So, if we trace—"

"Trace the " Ahmed's expression went blank. Mid-thought, mid-sentence. Like someone had flipped a switch. "The we need to What were we talking about?" He looked around the room, genuinely confused about where he was.

"Ahmed?" Jonnie stood, concerned.

"Sorry. I'm sorry." Ahmed pressed his fingers to his temples. "We were talking about something. Money? Routes?" His voice climbed with frustration. "I *had* it. It

was *right* there, but then it just vanished. Like someone deleted it from my head while I was speaking." His breathing accelerated as his panic rose.

"It's alright, mate. Just breathe."

"It's not alright!" Ahmed's hands were shaking again. "I was mid-sentence, Jonnie. I was explaining something I *knew*, something I understood, and then nothing. Just static. Just empty."

At 01.30, Ahmed suddenly looked up from the document he'd been staring at for fifteen minutes. "Jonnie?"

"Yeah?"

"What's your brother's name?"

Jonnie's stomach dropped. "Joey. Why?"

"Joey," Ahmed repeated carefully, testing the shape of the word. "Right. Joey. You told me that, didn't you? You talked about him."

"Yeah. You remembered he was in Birmingham. You asked if he was safe."

Ahmed's face crumpled. "I don't remember that conversation. I remember we talked. I remember it mattered. But the details are gone." He looked down at his hands. "How much am I forgetting? How much have I already lost without realising?"

"Ahmed—"

"Do you know what that feels like?" Ahmed's voice cracked. "Knowing there are holes in your memory and not knowing how big they are? What if I've forgotten people? Conversations? Things I promised? What if I wake up tomorrow and don't remember your name? What if I don't remember *my* name?" He was crying again, silently this time, tears just sliding down his face unchecked. "What if I forget who I am entirely? What if I don't even notice because the part of me that would notice is already gone?"

At 02.15, Ahmed tried to help cross-reference dates. He picked up a document, read the same line four times, lips moving as he struggled. "This says it says the deployment was was in " He put the paper down. Picked it up again. Read it again. "In March. No. May? It says right here, but I can't I can't hold the information. I read it, but by the time I get to the end of the sentence, I've forgotten the beginning."

He read it again. Out loud this time and slowly, like a child sounding out words. "'Phase Two deployment scheduled for May.' There. See? I can *read* it." Jonnie waited. "But now " Ahmed looked up. "What did I just read?" Silence. "I don't know." Ahmed's voice was hollow. "I just read it out loud, but I can't remember what it said." He put the paper down very carefully, hands trembling. "They broke something fundamental. The thing that lets you hold information in your head long enough to use it. I'm not forgetting things. I'm not able to remember them in the first place."

Around 03.00, Ahmed's speech started to slur. Not like drunkenness—more like exhaustion. Like his brain was shutting down from overload. "The arrays if they're broadcasting the holo the holo "

"Holographic projections?" Jonnie supplied.

Ahmed nodded, eyes half-closed. "Yeah. That. They'd need need power massive power can't just " His head dropped forward onto his arms mid-sentence. His brain had just stopped and shut his body down, like a battery that had run out of power.

Jonnie and Brian sat in silence for a moment, watching Ahmed's shoulders rise and fall with uneven breaths. "He's dreaming about it," Brian observed quietly, closing a folder. "The evaluation. They all do. Watch his hands."

Ahmed's fingers were twitching against the workbench. The small, repetitive movements made it look like he was typing. Like he was trying to type the answers to questions he couldn't escape, even in sleep. His lips moved silently, forming words. His face contorted. He couldn't find peace even in unconsciousness.

"Can he recover?" Jonnie asked, unable to look away. "Or is this permanent?"

Brian removed his glasses, cleaned them slowly in a gesture that bought time. "I don't know. Research suggests the neural restructuring targets specific pathways like memory formation, complex processing and executive function. It's designed to be irreversible because reversing it would mean the Global State admitting they're performing medical torture." He put his glasses back on and met Jonnie's eyes. "But human brains are resilient. Science still doesn't understand the extent of neuroplasticity. Sometimes the brain can find new pathways and work around the damage. Children who've had entire hemispheres removed relearn functions that the destroyed tissue used to handle. Ahmed's brain might compensate."

"Might."

"Might." Brian's expression was clinical, but not cruel. "He might regain some functionality. Adapt. Learn to work within his new limitations. Or he might deteriorate further. The damage could cascade and spread. Either way " He looked at Ahmed's sleeping form and the twitching fingers still typing responses to phantom questions. "Either way, he'll never be exactly who he was. That person is gone. The question is whether enough remains to build someone new."

"That's monstrous."

"Yes." Brian's voice was flat. "That's the point. They don't always kill dissidents. They unmake them. Leave them as walking, breathing examples of what happens when you resist. Ahmed survives, but Ahmed-as-he-was doesn't. It's a fate worse than execution because the victim has to keep living with the loss." Brian shuffled the documents in front of him. "It's the logical endpoint of transhumanism weaponised. If you can edit consciousness, why wouldn't you? From the Global State's perspective, they're not destroying people; they're correcting them. Upgrading faulty wetware."

Jonnie felt sick. "We're not wetware. We're humans with souls."

"To them, that's the same thing. Biological machines that can be debugged and patched. Ahmed had the wrong software running—independent thought, personal loyalty, ethical boundaries. So, they wiped those subroutines and installed obedience protocols."

"You sound like you approve."

"Of course I don't approve. I'm documenting. The Global State's approach to consciousness is revolutionary from a technical standpoint, but that doesn't make it any less horrifying and unethical. And it must be exposed."

Ahmed whimpered in his sleep. His hand reached out, grasping at nothing. Jonnie wanted to wake him and pull him out of whatever hell he was reliving, but Brian shook his head. "Let him rest. Consciousness isn't kinder right now."

Sarah had approached during their conversation, moving silently. "Brian's right: Ahmed needs rest. And so do you. You've been at this for hours."

"Can't. We've got—"

"Not enough time, I know. But you'll be useless if you collapse." Her eyes held his, genuine concern mixed with something else. Something that made his chest

tight. "Come on. Twenty-minute power nap. Just close your eyes."

She led him to the back room where Mae was sleeping in a small space insulated from the worst of the cold. A blanket was spread on the floor with another folded as a pillow. It was primitive, but it felt like luxury. Jonnie sat heavily, every muscle protesting. Sarah settled beside him, close enough that their shoulders touched. In the darkness, with only the city lights filtering through cracks, her face was soft and unguarded.

"Ahmed's not going to make it, is he?" Jonnie asked quietly. "Even if we win, even if we expose everything—what they did to him, that's permanent?"

"Probably." Sarah's honesty was almost comforting. "But he's alive. He's still fighting in whatever way he can. That counts for something."

"Does it? If you're not really yourself anymore, if your own thoughts aren't yours, are you still alive? Or just a ghost wearing a familiar face?"

"I don't know." Her hand found his in the darkness, fingers threading together. "I think as long as you're still asking those questions, you're still human. It's when you stop questioning, when you accept the programming completely—that's when you're gone."

They sat in silence, hands linked, listening to Mae's soft breathing. Jonnie felt the pull of sleep, but also the pull of this moment—Sarah's warmth, her presence, the fragile intimacy of shared exhaustion. "When we've exposed the lie. Where does the Resistance go?" he asked.

"I don't let myself think that far ahead. Hopes are dangerous. It makes you careless."

"But if you could. If you let yourself hope."

"Then I'd want what everyone wants. Something simple. Something human. A normal life, like before." Her thumb traced circles on his palm. "But I don't think people like us get simple. We know too much. We've seen too much. That changes you."

"Changes you into what?"

"Into ghosts. Ahmed's not the only one. We're all ghosts now, Jonnie. We died the moment we chose the Resistance. Everything after is just borrowed time."

Jonnie let himself rest against Sarah, finding a fragile comfort in the presence of someone equally damaged by the system. They were quiet, the exhaustion of

constant hiding replaced by a temporary, dangerous intimacy. Their eyes met. Something passed between them that felt less like a new feeling and more like something that had been quietly building since Limehouse. Not just attraction, although he felt that like a drag in his chest. It was the sense that, out of all the broken people here, she was the one whose damage most closely matched his.

"You're not a ghost," Jonnie said, squeezing her hand. "You're here. You're real. I can feel you."

She squeezed back. "Get some rest. We've got work to do."

Chapter 12

The Supply Trap

"There's someone who might help us get what we need to hack the Global State's broadcast," Suzanne said, her voice careful. "Goes by the Merchant. He's an old Resistance contact from before the initial purges. He has access to information that nobody else has. He's trustworthy."

Jonnie had heard rumours about the Merchant. It was said he was a former procurement specialist who'd pivoted to black market operations when the Global State had implemented their various restrictions. He had a reputation for brokering trade deals between Resistance cells and for being able to source the impossible. More importantly, he was well-connected across the Resistance, with plenty of opportunities to sell out contacts to the Global State, but he never did. That meant he was either a true believer or a true capitalist. Jonnie had learned the distinction didn't matter much when survival was at stake.

Suzanne had wheeled herself towards her rucksack and retrieved one of her untraceable burner phones. She dialled from memory. The line connected on the second ring. "It's Suzanne. We need heavy-duty power cells. Urgently." She listened for a minute. "Yes, I'll send the details through now." She pulled the phone away from her ear and typed for a few seconds before resuming the call. "Did you get that?" She listened for a couple of minutes, nodded once. "Tottenham. Understood." She hung up and faced the others.

"We'll find what we need in a storage facility in Tottenham." She was already mapping the route. "You'll need to move now. Jonnie, you're in charge of this one. Take Robyn and Fernsby with you. This place should be secure, but you never

know, so make sure you gear up. The power cells are towards the back against the left wall. Get in, take what you need and get out."

"Okay." Jonnie took the route map and moved out immediately with the others.

The supply depot squatted in a converted warehouse district in what used to be Tottenham. There were no cameras or biometric scanners—nothing that would leave a digital footprint. It was a ghost zone. The Global State pretended areas like this didn't exist because acknowledging them meant admitting their surveillance grid had gaps.

Jonnie crouched behind a rusted shipping container, watching the depot's entrance. Beside him, Robyn flicked open her switchblade and proceeded to check the edge with her thumb. It was a tic, Jonnie realised—something she did to calm her nerves. She slid the knife back into her pocket, only to draw it out again a few minutes later. Ahmed sat with his back against the container, absently picking at the bandage on his left hand. He'd insisted on going despite his condition. Jonnie suspected the real reason was that staying behind meant being alone with his damaged thoughts, and that scared him more than the threat of any physical danger.

"I'm not getting any thermal signatures," Fernsby reported, studying his scanner. "But there's a lot of equipment in there, lots of metal. It could be blocking any signals."

"We need those power cells," Jonnie said, more to convince himself than the others. "Without them, the broadcast stays theoretical. Brian's got the software ready and the relay coordinates locked in. But none of it matters if we can't show people the truth."

"We've been watching the place for twenty minutes," Robyn said. "No patrol patterns. No obvious security. Either it's genuinely abandoned, or it's the best trap I've ever seen."

"The Merchant's intel has been solid so far," Fernsby offered, although his voice carried doubt.

"It's always solid until it isn't," Robyn countered. "Then we're dead."

Jonnie made the decision. "We go in. Robyn leads, Ahmed and I will grab the stuff, Fernsby keeps watch. We're in and out in five minutes."

"And if it's a trap?" Ahmed asked.

"Then we run for our lives and carry what we can," Jonnie replied.

Fernsby's scanner beeped. He froze, studying the display. "I've got a signal. One point seven gig. It's very faint, but it's there."

"Where's it coming from?" Jonnie asked.

"I can't pinpoint it. Could be coming from inside the depot. Lots of old electronics around here on legacy frequencies." Fernsby adjusted the scanner, sweeping the area. The signal pulsed steadily, if faintly. "Or it could be something tracking us."

"Can you block it?" Robyn asked.

"Not without knowing what it is."

They waited another five minutes, watching for any sign the signal had alerted someone to their presence. Nothing moved. The depot remained silent. "We go," Jonnie decided. "Now, fast."

The depot's interior was a maze of shelving units and salvaged technology—decades of accumulated refuse from surveillance upgrades. When the Global State installed new cameras, new scanners, or new biometric systems, the old equipment ended up here, supposedly decommissioned, but still functional. Black market traders sold it to those living off the grid.

Jonnie found the power cells exactly where the Merchant's intelligence had said they would be. There were twelve industrial-grade lithium batteries designed for emergency broadcast systems. Each one was the size of a car battery—heavy and awkward, but perfect for their needs.

"Start loading," he instructed, pulling a collapsible cart from Ahmed's pack.

Robyn had positioned herself at the entrance, watching for approach vectors. Fernsby scanned continuously, monitoring for electronic signatures that might indicate surveillance activation. Ahmed helped Jonnie load the cells. Despite their damaged hands, they moved with gritted determination.

They'd secured eight of the twelve cells when Fernsby's scanner shrieked. "Active sweep! We've got multiple nodes in a coordinated pattern—they're triangulating this position!"

"How long?" Robyn demanded.

"Minutes. Maybe less."

That's when the lights came on.

The overhead fluorescents flooded the depot with painful brightness. Jonnie's eyes watered, momentarily blinding him. When his vision cleared, he saw six guards converging on them. They were kitted out in full Global State combat gear, their faces hidden behind visors. Their automatic weapons were trained on the Resistance members with unerring accuracy. They'd been waiting, perfectly positioned, perfectly patient. "Subjects identified," one guard announced into his radio. "Commencing apprehension protocol."

"Run!" Robyn shouted, already moving.

Jonnie grabbed Ahmed and the cart with the eight cells they'd managed to load and sprinted towards the exit. Behind him, automatic weapons barked. Bullets tore through shelving units, through salvaged electronics and through the space where he'd been standing seconds before.

Robyn had engaged the nearest guard, her knife finding the gap between helmet and body armour. The man went down gurgling. Another guard swung his weapon towards her, but she was already moving, too fast for aim, too close to track.

Fernsby provided covering fire, aiming effectively enough to make the guards duck.

Ahmed stumbled, his damaged hand failing to grip the cart properly. He went down hard, the cart spilling cells across the concrete. Jonnie skidded to a stop, torn between escape and abandoning his ally. "Go!" Ahmed shouted, already scrambling to gather cells. "I'm right behind you!" Jonnie ran, dragging the cart with five cells secured on it, while Ahmed gathered two more, leaving one behind.

The exit loomed ahead. Fernsby was there, still laying down cover fire to allow Jonnie and Ahmed to make their escape. Jonnie burst out of the depot into daylight, lungs burning. Ahmed emerged seconds later, arms full of salvaged cells, blood running from a gash on his forehead. Fernsby exited and, finally, Robyn backed out of the door.

Something inside the depot exploded. The blast wasn't large, but it was hot enough to force the guards back and bright enough to blind optical sensors. Jonnie had no doubt the explosion was Robyn's work—a diversion to help them escape.

They ran through abandoned streets and down alleys too narrow for drone pursuit until they reached their vehicle. Fernsby's scanner showed pursuit vectors,

but the guards weren't following with expected aggression. That was almost worse because it usually meant they had other ways to track their fugitives—methods Jonnie didn't want to speculate about while he was fleeing for his life.

The route back to the print shop took thirty minutes of evasive driving. They arrived exhausted, bleeding and seven power cells richer—not the twelve they'd hoped for, but hopefully enough.

Sarah met them at the door, Mae clutching her leg. The little girl's eyes were too knowing and too calm for someone her age watching wounded people stumble into safety. "Ambush?" Sarah asked.

"Trap," Jonnie confirmed, setting down the cells. "They were waiting. They knew exactly where to hide and exactly when we'd arrive."

"The Merchant's intelligence was compromised?" Suzanne's voice came from deeper inside as her wheelchair rolled into view.

"Or something else." Fernsby stared at his scanner, replaying the data from the depot. "That one point seven gig signal I detected earlier? It activated the depot's surveillance systems. Someone was broadcasting our location."

Suspicious looks flicked from one face to another. Who had access to communications? Who knew the mission timing? Who benefited from the Resistance being tracked?

"We can't do this now," Jonnie said, forcing calm he didn't feel. "We got what we needed and we got out alive. That's a win."

"Is it?" Robyn was cleaning blood off her blade. None of it hers. "We didn't get everything we needed. And that supply depot is burned. Because someone in this room might be transmitting our every move to the Global State."

The accusation hung in the air like stale smoke.

Sarah's hand tightened on Mae's shoulder. Ahmed wouldn't meet anyone's eyes. Fernsby clutched his scanner like it might contain answers. Suzanne sat perfectly still in her wheelchair, face unreadable.

Brian walked out from the back room, the laptop clutched to his chest. "I've got something from the files Billy gave me. You need to see this."

"Can it wait?" Suzanne asked. "We need to determine if we've been compromised."

Brian looked around at the group as if just realising that he'd interrupted something. "Actually, no. It can't wait. I've been cross-referencing budget allocations against contractor assignments for the past six hours. Following money trails through shell companies and obscured partnerships." Jonnie made a winding motion with his finger, encouraging Brian to get to the point. "Anyway I found it. The complete blueprint for Project Blue Beam."

Everyone stared at him.

"Here, look." Brian set his laptop up on a table and connected a USB to it. Documents flashed open. "See? It's everything. Not just what it is, but how they built it, who built it, where every relay station is positioned."

He had found it. Buried in millions of pages, he'd found the key documents—the ones that shouldn't exist, the files that should have been deleted decades ago.

Brian took them through the evidence. There were architectural plans and contractor lists. There were budget authorisations signed by unelected officials whose names appeared nowhere in official records. There were equipment manifests for holographic projectors and CGI powerful enough to paint false images across the sky. And there were coordinates—exact geographical locations of every relay station in the network.

It was everything they needed to prove that the Global State had spent years—perhaps generations—building infrastructure for a lie massive enough to enslave the world.

"This is it," Jonnie breathed, staring at the data. "This is what we risked everything for."

"Can we broadcast it?" Suzanne asked.

"With seven power cells?" Brian calculated quickly. "We'll need severe data compression. We'd have to focus on the core revelations—things like the relay coordinates, contractor evidence and budget trails. And in the time we have it would be tight, but yes, I think we can do it. The key, though, is that we'd need physical access to a relay station."

"One problem at a time," Suzanne said. "I'm speaking to the Merchant about this. He thinks there's a way."

"His intelligence just nearly got us killed," Robyn interjected.

"Or someone else's signal did," Fernsby countered, eyes roving across the room without settling on anyone.

Jonnie looked around the group. They were all tired and beaten down. But they'd come this far, right? And at this point, they no longer had much to lose. But they did have a lot to gain. He met Suzanne's eyes. She inclined her head.

"Okay, here's the thing. We don't know what went wrong at the depot. But the Merchant's intel has always been solid before, right?" Jonnie asked and got reluctant nods from Robyn and the others. "So, we might not have all the pieces yet, but I think we need to trust him. This is our shot and we should take it.

"We've got about eighty-five hours left before the broadcast," Jonnie decided. "So, Brian compresses the files and the rest of us work on the actual broadcast requirements. We'll work in shifts and in pairs. No one works alone with the comms equipment. Trust is earned second by second from this point forward."

He didn't say what everyone was thinking: that one of them might be a traitor. They couldn't afford to ignore that, but they couldn't let it stop them either.

"And after we broadcast?" Sarah asked quietly.

"Then the world knows the truth about Project Blue Beam. And we live with whatever consequences that brings."

Chapter 13

Algorithmic Hum

The print shop had developed its own rhythm since they'd set up operations—the shuffle of feet on concrete, the scratch of charcoal on paper, the mechanical click of Robyn's knife opening and closing. Jonnie had stopped hearing most of it. His world had contracted down to the laptop screen and the quiet hum of its cooling fan.

Except the hum wasn't coming just from the laptop fan. He'd noticed it a few hours ago—a frequency just at the edge of perception. At first, he'd thought it was simply exhaustion making his mind buzz. But now, he was certain it was real. The system was listening. More than that, it was responding.

"You alright?" Brian had materialised beside him, holding two mugs of something that might have been tea or might have been brown water filtered through old newsprint.

"Fine." Jonnie accepted the mug without looking away from the screen. "Just thinking."

"Dangerously similar to not sleeping."

"Sleep's overrated."

"So's psychosis, but you keep working like this, you're heading that way."

Jonnie reluctantly tore his gaze from the laptop. With his bloodshot eyes, a salt-and-pepper bristle rooting into his dark skin, Brian looked worse than he felt. They were all falling apart in their own ways. Ahmed was catatonic in the corner. Mae was drawing increasingly disturbing images. Robyn and Fernsby had stopped arguing only because they'd run out of energy.

The countdown was relentless and utterly indifferent to human exhaustion.

"I've tried forty-eight different approaches," Jonnie said, his voice flat. "Proxy servers, VPN chains, spoofed credentials, brute force attacks, social engineering protocols—you name it, I tried it. You know how many worked?"

"I'm guessing none."

"Worse than none. Every single attempt made the system stronger. I can see it happening in real-time—the authentication protocols adapting, the firewalls reconfiguring. It's learning from my attacks faster than I can devise new ones."

He pulled up a diagram he'd made that mapped the Global State's broadcast network, along with its security architecture. What had started as a relatively straightforward network map now resembled a living organism with tendrils of code spreading and connecting in patterns that shouldn't be possible with standard programming.

That's adaptive AI," Brian breathed. "Machine learning on a scale that requires quantum processing and—"

"And resources that only the Global State could afford. Yeah." Jonnie zoomed in on a cluster of nodes. "This is the authentication layer. Watch what happens when I attempt a credential injection." His fingers moved across the keyboard and, on screen, a line of code snaked towards the pulsing cluster. Before it could make contact, the entire network shifted, the nodes rearranging themselves. New pathways opened while others closed, enabling the cluster to move to a position of defensive advantage.

"Christ," Brian muttered. "It predicted your attack before you finished typing it."

"Exactly. Based on my previous attempts, it's built a predictive model of my methods. Every keystroke I make feeds that model. Every approach I try makes it more accurate."

The hum had grown louder, although Brian didn't seem to notice it. Jonnie wondered again if it was real, or if his mind was creating an auditory manifestation of his growing paranoia. Either possibility was disturbing.

"So, what's the solution?" Brian asked.

"There isn't one. Not digitally. My old clearance level gave me access to data and comms, and I thought that would be enough to hack the broadcast system. But this is way beyond my skillset."

"So, we're screwed," Brian said without emotion.

"Digitally? Yes. The system's just too sophisticated. Every move I make, it counters. Every vulnerability I find, it patches in real time. It's unhackable."

Across the room, Sarah had woken Mae and was helping her daughter into a jacket in preparation for a supply run. Mae's drawings were scattered around her sleeping area, each one more unsettling than the last: faceless stick figures, walls made of eyes and a girl drowning in numbers. But while Mae's drawings became more unsettling, the Oracle's messages were becoming less cryptic. Last night's message had been particularly direct:

THE SYSTEM SEES ALL. THE SYSTEM KNOWS ALL. THE DOOR YOU SEEK EXISTS, BUT YOU CANNOT OPEN IT FROM THE OUTSIDE.

"There must be something, some weakness in the architecture," Brian pressed, drawing Jonnie's attention back to their predicament. "No system is perfect."

"This one's close enough." Jonnie closed the laptop with deliberate care, cutting off the hum. The silence that followed was somehow louder. "The only real vulnerability is going to be the human element. If we could turn someone inside and get them to create a back door "

"Are we recruiting?" Robyn had joined them without Jonnie noticing her approach. She moved like smoke when she wanted to.

"Not recruiting. Not yet, anyway. Just theorising." Brian drained his mug and grimaced. "Definitely not tea."

"It's gravy granules and water. Best I could do with what's left." Robyn perched on the edge of the table, knife in hand as always. She wasn't trying to be threatening—she just needed something to occupy her fingers. "So, I gather the hack's a bust. What's the backup plan?"

"There isn't one," Jonnie said. "That's what I'm trying to explain. The system is " He struggled for words. "It's not technology like I'm used to. It's well, it's more like a living organism. It adapts, learns and grows stronger with every challenge. Fighting it digitally is like trying to punch water. You just can't hurt what's fundamentally fluid."

"Then I guess we go analogue," Robyn said, as if it were obvious. "If you can't hack it, smack it. We just need a big enough hammer."

"Huh." Brian scratched at his stubble. "The broadcast arrays *are* physical. Located somewhere up north, according to the archives. If we could reach them

and damage the hardware directly "

"We'd need to get past whatever security's protecting them *and* cause enough damage to interrupt a global broadcast." Jonnie shook his head. "Even if we had the location, we don't have the time or resources. And the moment we tried, every drone and guard in the Global State would converge on our position. Not to mention that the whole point is that we want to be able to intercept the broadcast with one of our own, not stop it."

"Oh, yeah. Sorry, I guess I'm too sleep deprived to think clearly anymore." Brian shook his head ruefully.

"You and me both."

The impossibility of it settled over them like dust. They'd come so far and risked so much. The thought of it ending here was devastating.

Fernsby had been listening to their conversation from his nest of equipment, headphones pushed back. "There's always a way in. You just haven't found it yet."

"I've tried everything I know."

"Then try what you don't know." He stood and stretched, joints cracking. "Systems this complex always have old code left over from earlier versions. I bet you there are vulnerabilities there you could exploit."

"I'm sure you're right. But you're talking about going through millions and millions of lines of code, one by one. That kind of thing takes months—which we don't have."

"Then maybe Robyn's right," Fernsby said.

"About going analogue?"

"Kind of. Maybe we need to think outside the box."

The hum had returned. Or maybe it had never left. Jonnie pressed his palms against his eyes, seeing phosphenes dance behind the lids. Suzanne's trust in him had made him believe in himself, but now he was feeling the crushing weight of doubt. This would always have been a herculean task, but trying to do it in five days? Who were they kidding? The Global State's surveillance grid wasn't just technology—it was philosophy made manifest. And he'd thought he could outsmart it with a laptop and righteous anger.

"I need some air," he announced, standing abruptly. The room tilted slightly before he caught himself with a hand on the back of the chair. "Just five

minutes."

Sarah intercepted him near the door. "Everything alright, love?"

"Brilliant. Just taking a constitutional before I crack the most sophisticated security system ever devised by human civilisation."

"Jonnie—" Sarah reached for his hand.

"Sorry. That was I'm just tired. And I'm really struggling to crack this." He met her eyes and found concern there. And a flicker of something else, gone before he could catalogue it. Or maybe he was just too tired to think straight. "I'll be back in a minute. Promise."

"Feeling better?" Sarah asked when Jonnie returned to the print shop.

"Yeah, a bit, thanks." He sat down in front of his laptop, preparing to get back to work, but Sarah sat down next to him with a deep sigh. He pulled her close and she rested her head on his shoulder. "We're going to make it happen," he said quietly. "The broadcast. We're going to show the world what our rulers really are."

"Hmm," she murmured, her eyes closed. "Sure."

"Are you alright?" Jonnie asked, shifting away and forcing Sarah to lift her head and look at him. "You don't sound like you believe me."

"I do. Sorry, I'm just tired." She pulled him close again and put her head back on his shoulder.

"We all are," he agreed. But he'd noticed that she hadn't quite met his eyes when she'd answered him.

"I'm sorry," Sarah whispered again as she stood. Jonnie smiled up at her as she cupped his face. "I'll leave you to it."

Jonnie stretched his neck from side to side, wincing when his vertebrae cracked. He had a great deal of work to do and not a lot of time to do it.

Jonnie was starting at his umpteenth failure to hack into the system. "How the hell did you know I was going to do that?"

"Talking to yourself, mate? First sign of madness."

Jonnie spun around. Ahmed stood at his shoulder, looking simultaneously more and less present than he had in days. The Psycho-Eval had left him fragmented, but occasionally, like now, the old Ahmed surfaced.

"I thought you were resting," Jonnie said, trying to get his heartbeat back under control.

"Tried. Kept dreaming about the chair. That room. That *thing* creeping around in my head. Decided insomnia was preferable."

"Fair enough. Pull up a chair."

Ahmed sat next to Jonnie and watched him work in companionable silence. He said nothing as Jonnie failed over and over and over again. "You can't beat it," Ahmed said finally. "The system. It's designed to be unbeatable. That's the point."

"Cheers for the encouragement."

"I'm not trying to discourage you." Ahmed turned to face him properly. "You're approaching this like it's a puzzle to solve. Find the right sequence of keystrokes, crack the code, save the day. But it's not a puzzle—it's a trap. The system wants you to keep trying, wants you to feed it more data about your dissenting methodology. And every failed attempt makes you more predictable."

"So, what's your suggestion? Give up?"

"Change the game. Stop playing by their rules." Ahmed's eyes cleared and his focus sharpened. "The door isn't digital. It never was."

The hum in his mind had stopped. It had become so pervasive, that when it stopped, the world felt hollowed out.

"Fernsby and Robyn said something similar, but I just don't know how we go about that. Not in the time we have."

"You'll figure it out. God knows I can't—not like this." He patted Jonnie on the shoulder, then shuffled away, leaving Jonnie with a great deal to think about, but no clear path forward.

He turned back to the laptop. The screen flickered to life, cursor blinking expectantly, Jonnie noted absently that the hum was back. He began typing. The system would counter—it always did—but perhaps, somewhere in those counters there was a pattern he'd missed. Some vulnerability so simple the architects had overlooked it, just like Fernsby had suggested. He hit enter on his latest attempt and waited for the AI to counter.

It didn't.

A green portal opened on his screen. He was in. He couldn't believe it. He was in! He sat frozen in shock. And then a message appeared across his screen:

HELLO JONNIE VILLIN. CLEARANCE LEVEL 5. FLAGGED. TERMINATED. ENEMY OF THE GLOBAL STATE. YOU WERE ALWAYS GOING TO FAIL.

The portal flickered and disappeared.

For three seconds, he had been inside the Global State's system. But it hadn't been his own doing; it was the AI. It had been tracking his every move like it was playing with him. It had allowed him a brief moment to feel like he was victorious, only to mock him.

It wanted him to know that it knew him better than he knew himself. And it wanted him to know that he could never beat it.

Jonnie shut the laptop and walked away.

Chapter 14

The Choice

The message had arrived late the previous night, encrypted through channels so convoluted that by the time Suzanne decoded it, the sender could have been anyone, anywhere.

BILLY DETAINED AT SECTOR 7 HOLDING FACILITY. SCHEDULED FOR PSYCHO-EVAL 08.00 TOMORROW. THIS IS YOUR WINDOW. -FRIEND

It was now stupid o'clock in the morning. Jonnie had barely had any sleep. He stared at the words on Suzanne's screen through burning eyes, feeling his stomach drop. Billy. The friend who'd helped him. The quiet man in his sixties who'd risked everything to leak documentation to the Resistance.

"It could be a trap," Fernsby said, leaning over Suzanne's shoulder. "An anonymous tip about a detained ally scheduled for evaluation? That's textbook bait, innit?"

"Could be," Suzanne agreed. "But if it's real, we lose one of our most valuable contacts. Billy knows what's in our archives better than anyone. The intelligence in his head is irreplaceable."

Robyn was already checking her weapons. "Tell me about the Sector 7 facility."

How could they all sound so awake?

"It's a former police station that was converted to a temporary detention during the Consolidation." Fernsby pulled up schematics on his scanner. "Medium security. We're looking at around a dozen guards and standard facial recognition at entry points. Biometric locks on cells. Not a walk in the park, but not the worst I've seen." He paused. "But, if we stage a rescue, we'll be pulling resources from broadcast preparation and it's not like we've got a lot of time on our hands. Not to

mention that we're talking about a rescue operation that could get us all captured. Or killed."

Their talking had woken Sarah. She joined them, leaving Mae sleeping in the corner.

"We've got to try to get Billy out. You know we don't leave somebody behind if there's a chance," Jonnie said, rubbing a hand over his face to try to get the blood flowing.

"We might have to. We all signed up knowing the risks." Ahmed's voice was hollow; he spoke from experience. "One man versus the mission. Billy's intel, while valuable, isn't mission-critical at this stage. But the broadcast will reach millions. Attempting to rescue him risks everything for limited gain."

It was brutal, but it was true. The choice should be obvious. But that didn't mean it was easy. Billy had been the first person to confirm what Jonnie had seen was true; the first person to make him feel normal when he thought he was going crazy. Billy had helped him choose courage over complacency inside the system. He had introduced him to Ahmed and the route to the Resistance. He had been his first ally. More than that, he had been a friend.

"We can't sacrifice him," Jonnie said.

"I agree with Jonnie," Sarah said. Her hand brushed against her pocket. Jonnie had noticed her doing that before—it was an unconscious gesture, as though she was reassuring herself that she had her wallet or her keys, although nobody carried wallets or keys anymore. Especially not when they'd just gotten out of bed.

Suzanne looked at the two of them. "I know what I said earlier about the intel in his head, but think this through. We have a critical mission little more than a day away. Can we do this? I know that sounds cruel, but we have to be practical."

"I know." Jonnie met her eyes. "But if we leave him—if we decide his life is worth less than our operation—then what are we fighting for? We're no better than the system."

"I'm not sure we can afford to be that moral," Fernsby said, but his voice lacked conviction.

"Maybe. But I'm not sure we can afford not to be either." Jonnie looked around the room, making eye contact with every one of his fellow Resistance fighters.

Robyn had stopped checking her weapons. "The Ghost makes a point. We've all made the cold calculations before. All survived by being ruthless. But ruthlessness is what they taught us. Maybe it's time we remembered what they tried to make us forget."

The silence stretched, then Suzanne nodded slowly. "Okay. Jonnie, Fernsby, Robyn and Ahmed. A four-person team. Sarah stays here with Mae and maintains communications. Brian, you need to stay on the archive compression. If you're not back here by 08.00, we abort and you're on your own."

"Understood." Jonnie checked his watch and did some quick calculations in his head. Taking into account the time needed to travel to the facility, they had three hours to plan an operation that should take three weeks.

The Sector 7 facility squatted in what used to be Haringey in a brutalist concrete structure that had survived regime changes and a dozen political purges. They approached from the south, using abandoned residential towers for cover. Fernsby's scanner showed six guards posted on the exterior of the building. Six moving heat signatures suggested six guards on the interior on twenty-minute rotations. Facial recognition nodes glowed red on his display, marking zones where they'd be instantly identified.

"The holding cells are in the basement level," Fernsby whispered, highlighting the schematic. "Billy should be in Cell 7, according to standard detention protocols for intelligence crimes. To reach him, we need to breach the east service entrance, disable local surveillance, descend two floors and extract. Simple, innit?"

"Simple gets you killed," Robyn muttered, checking her knife for the fifteenth time.

Ahmed had been silent since they'd left the safehouse. He stared at the detention facility with an expression Jonnie couldn't read. Terror, maybe. Or recognition. The Psycho-Eval chair that had broken him had been in a facility much like this one. "You alright?" Jonnie asked quietly.

"No." Ahmed's bandaged hand trembled. "But I'm functional. That'll have to be enough."

At 06.47, the guard rotation created a three-minute gap in external surveillance. They moved.

The service entrance was exactly where Fernsby's intelligence indicated—a reinforced door marked "Authorised Personnel Only" and secured with a biometric lock. Fernsby used cloned credentials provided by the Merchant to bypass it with surprising ease.

Inside, the facility smelled of disinfectant and fear. Fluorescent lights hummed overhead, casting everything in a putrid green pallor. Cameras tracked from corners with their steady and accusatory red lights. "The cameras are looped," Fernsby confirmed, watching his scanner. "The local network thinks we're maintenance staff conducting a routine inspection. We've got maybe twenty minutes before the AI flags an inconsistency."

They descended stairs that echoed with every footstep despite their efforts at stealth. The basement level was colder and damper than the surface. Steel doors marked with numbers and biohazard warnings lined the corridors. Through reinforced windows in the doors, Jonnie glimpsed detainees—empty shells of men and women awaiting their turns in the Psycho-Eval chair. A wave of disgust tried to overwhelm him. He moved on.

Cell 7 was at the corridor's end. Through the window, Jonnie saw Billy. The man had aged a decade since he last saw him. His salt-and-pepper hair had turned completely white. His hands shook uncontrollably. But when his eyes focused on Jonnie's face through the glass, they still held recognition. They hadn't broken him yet.

Fernsby worked the biometric lock while Robyn and Ahmed maintained watch at the corridor junction. Jonnie pressed his hand against the window, trying to convey reassurance. Billy nodded slowly, understanding without words. The lock disengaged and the door opened with a pneumatic hiss.

"Billy," Jonnie breathed. "Can you walk?"

"I think so." Billy's voice was hoarse from disuse. "They haven't the evaluation is scheduled for 08.00."

"Not anymore. We're getting you out."

That's when the alarms started. Deafening klaxons turned the corridor into a resonating chamber of panic, while red emergency lights strobed, making movement disorienting. "That's not possible!" Fernsby shouted over the noise. "The camera loops should have held!"

"Forget should have!" Robyn was already running towards the stairs. "Move!"

They ran. Billy stumbled between Jonnie and Ahmed, his legs uncertain after days of confinement. They could hear shouts as guards began to converge on the corridor.

Robyn reached the stairwell back to the surface, froze, then threw herself out of the way as automatic weapons' fire tore chunks from the doorframe. "They've got the stairs covered!" she shouted. "At least four operators."

"Alternate route?" Jonnie demanded.

Fernsby was frantically consulting his scanner. "Maintenance shaft, two corridors over. Should emerge at ground level, but—"

"But what?"

"It's narrow. One person at a time. And if they've sealed it from above, we're trapped."

The boots were getting closer. Voices shouted commands. These weren't standard guards—these were elite commandos.

"We have no choice. Go!"

They sprinted down the corridor as the first guards rounded the corner behind them. Automatic weapons barked, bullets ricocheting off concrete and steel. Jonnie felt something tug at his sleeve, but he kept moving.

The maintenance shaft was exactly where Fernsby had indicated—a narrow, vertical tunnel with rusted ladder rungs ascending into darkness. Robyn went up first, climbing quickly despite the confined space. Ahmed went next, his bandaged hand making climbing awkward. But that's where the plan fell apart. Billy was lagging behind due to his weakened state. Jonnie turned to Fernsby, "Go, just go."

"Not without you."

"I'll hold them off. Give Billy some cover. You help him when he starts to climb."

Fernsby looked like he was about to argue, but then he handed over his gun. "Get up as quickly as you can. Robyn and I will cover you from the top, yeah?" He started to climb.

Billy was ahead of the guards, but not by much. Jonnie fired a warning shot and the guards dove for cover, their return fire less precise. Billy made some

headway. He fired again. He didn't mean to hit anyone, but the bullet must have ricocheted, because a guard dropped, clutching his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, mate," Billy gasped, finally reaching the shaft.

"Just climb, mate."

"No, after you. I need you to pull me up."

Jonnie fired off another shot, then lunged for the shaft, climbing with desperate speed. His arms screamed. His shoulders burned. But he climbed. Billy followed more slowly, pulling himself up rung after rung while bullets sparked off metal below.

Above, daylight beckoned—a square of sky that meant escape, survival, success.

That's when they heard a voice from below, amplified by the acoustics of the shaft, "All individuals in the maintenance shaft, terminate your ascent, or we will execute all other detainees in this facility. You have ten seconds to comply."

Jonnie froze, his hands locked on the rungs. Below him, through the entrance to the shaft, he could see guards shoving prisoners to their knees. Men and women they'd dragged from the cells, who'd done nothing except question, except dissent, except refuse compliance. Seven of them, maybe eight. All holding their breath and waiting to see if strangers would trade their lives for escape.

"Nine seconds."

Above him, Fernsby had stopped climbing. Below, Billy was only three rungs up—still within reach of the guards.

"Eight seconds."

Robyn's voice drifted down from the top. "It's a bluff. They won't execute detainees. Too much paperwork, too many questions." Her voice lacked conviction.

"Seven seconds."

But Jonnie had seen the Global State's efficiency. He'd watched drones declare citizens enemies and freeze their assets without hesitation. Paperwork was nothing to algorithms.

"Six seconds."

Billy looked up at Jonnie, his face pale in the dim light. Then he did something Jonnie didn't expect: he let go.

"No!" Jonnie lunged down, trying to catch him.

But Billy had dropped deliberately, landing hard on the concrete below.

"Five seconds."

"I'm staying," Billy called up, his voice steady despite the tremor in his hands. "You have everything you need. And you don't need me. I'm I'm expendable. Intel without action is worthless."

"Four seconds."

"Billy, don't—" Fernsby started.

"I've been waiting for the chair all week. Might as well be today." Billy stood slowly, hands raised. "But you lot you can still do what needs doing. That matters more than one old man's memories."

"Three seconds."

Jonnie's throat closed. Billy was making a choice—the choice Jonnie had refused to make. He had to respect that.

"Two seconds."

"Go, mate," Billy said. "Make it count."

The guards moved forward, weapons trained. One grabbed Billy's arm, forcing him to his knees. Billy didn't resist. Just looked up through the shaft one last time. "Tell people what they did," he said. "Tell all of it."

"One second."

Jonnie climbed. His body moved on autopilot while his mind screamed. Each rung took him further from Billy, further from the choice he should have made and closer to the survival he didn't deserve.

"Time's up. Detainees, return to cells. This one comes with us."

Jonnie heard Billy being dragged away. By the time he reached daylight, gasping and shaking, Billy was gone.

They ran. Through abandoned buildings, across rubble-strewn courtyards, down alleys too narrow for surveillance drones. Fernsby led, scanner showing the optimal escape route. Ahmed followed, silent and grim. Robyn brought up the rear, checking constantly for pursuit. Jonnie followed Ahmed, Billy's words echoing with every footfall. *Make it count. Make it count. Make it count.*

They reached the safehouse door at 07.47—thirteen minutes before Suzanne's abort deadline. Sarah had the door open before they'd even cleared the final approach. "Where's Billy?"

"Captured." Fernsby's voice was flat. "Scheduled for immediate evaluation. He chose to stay. Bought us time to escape."

"He chose?" Sarah's eyes found Jonnie's. "Or you left him?"

"Both." Jonnie couldn't make his voice work properly. "He let go. Said we already had everything that we needed, that we didn't need him. He let go and I climbed. I left him there."

Jonnie leaned against the graffiti-covered wall, lungs still burning from the run. Billy was gone, sacrificed to buy their survival. He let his feet slide out along the floor and his back slide down the wall. He hugged his knees to his chest and dropped his head. Billy was gone.

He felt rather than saw Sarah crouch down next to him. Soft fingers touched his arm and he flinched. They withdrew. "You made a mission calculation," she said gently.

"Mission calculation. Yeah." His voice didn't sound like his own. "I just need a minute."

He heard Sarah stand up and walk away. Heard the others move off. The choice replayed in his mind, over and over: Billy's face as he fell, the sound of guards dragging him away, the knowledge that right now, in some sterile facility, they were strapping him into the chair and erasing him. Because he had climbed.

He heard Suzanne's chair coming closer, the rubber wheels scattering loose gravel on the cement floor. "He was already broken." But her voice lacked its usual certainty. "Days, if not weeks, in detention, facing evaluation That alone does something to a person. Any additional intel he might have had would likely have been compromised. It was the correct choice."

"Was it?" Jonnie lifted his head only to stare at his hands—the hands that had kept climbing while Billy fell. "Or did I just become what I'm fighting against? Making calculations about human worth, deciding whose life matters more, sacrificing individuals for collective goals?"

Movement caught his eye and he watched Mae walking towards him, holding one of her drawings. She held it out solemnly. It showed one man climbing a ladder while another man fell. The climbing man looked sad, but the falling man was smiling. "Uncle Billy chose," she said. "He liked what he chose."

Jonnie took the drawing with numb fingers. She was right—Billy had made his decision. But that didn't ease the pain. He'd gone there to rescue one man. He'd left with everyone except the one they'd come for.

Make it count.

Jonnie stood, forcing his legs to work, his mind to focus. Billy had given them time, given them survival, given them the chance to complete the mission. The least Jonnie could do was ensure that gift wasn't wasted.

Billy had said to make it count. So, he would.

Chapter 15

The North Code

The new safehouse was worse than the print shop—a condemned office building in Hackney scheduled for demolition that had somehow escaped the wrecking crews. The four floors were an empty shell of rotting carpet and asbestos, the windows boarded with plywood. There was no electricity except what they could generate from small portable generators. But it was off every grid, unmapped in current databases and forgotten by the bureaucracy that had condemned it—invisible, to all intents and purposes. For the Resistance, invisible meant safe.

Brian and Suzanne had been working through the night on the archived files while Jonnie got some sleep. Now, with just less than forty-eight hours until the broadcast, they'd finally broken through the encryption that had stymied every previous attempt.

"You need to see this," Brian said, not looking up from the laptop. His hands trembled from exhaustion or excitement, possibly both. "I've been wrong about everything. We all have."

Jonnie approached. "Wrong about what?"

"The nature of the deception. The scale of it." Brian pulled up a document, text dense with technical specifications and bureaucratic language. "This is from the Ministry of Integration, dated 2023—five years before the fabrication event. It's an internal memo classified at Level 5."

He read aloud, his voice shaking: "Project Blue Beam enters operational phase. Northern array technology on schedule. Initial broadcast tests successful. Recommendation: proceed with global implementation. Estimated compliance

increase: 78%. Projected resistance reduction: 94%. The alien narrative tests positively across all demographic segments."

"I don't get it." Robyn looked quizzically at Brian. "We already knew that this was all planned years before the supposed first Contact Event happened."

"No. Well, yes," Brian's voice was hollow. "But we thought the projection array was all up in Antarctica."

He pulled up technical schematics labelled "Northern Array: Phase 2 Implementation". The diagrams showed massive installations of transmission towers, projection equipment and holographic generators stretching across what used to be Scotland.

Fernsby had been reading silently. "The northern arrays—I've seen these on patrol maps. They're classified installations with heavy security. No-fly zones. We were told they were monitoring equipment listening for alien communications. At the time, I believed 'em. Later, I thought they must just be monitoring citizens. Maybe server farms, given the security."

"It's broadcasting equipment," Brian corrected. "The 'alien signals' everyone tunes in to watch are generated locally and transmitted globally, designed to maintain the illusion of ongoing contact."

Mae had approached silently to stand beside her mother. She stared at the laptop screen. "The Oracle told me the sky was lying."

Everyone turned to look at the seven-year-old.

"When?" Sarah asked gently.

"Lots of times. In dreams. In my drawings."

"Is this the proof we need?" Robyn asked, returning to tactical concerns. "Can we show people these files and finally prove that the Global State has been lying to everyone?"

Suzanne sighed. "Honestly, I don't know. The files are authentic. I've verified encryption signatures and cross-referenced dates and personnel. But to the average citizen? They'll probably believe it's Resistance propaganda. Fabricated bullshit. Another conspiracy theory."

"Then we need more than files," Jonnie said. "We need to hijack the broadcast and expose the system in real time. We were already planning to hijack their broadcast to show them proof, right? But if we do it right in the middle of one of

the all-powerful alien transmissions, it will show that they're not real; that it's all a hoax. That will prove that it's really human technology, not some super-advanced alien communication."

"I get what you're saying, but how?" Fernsby challenged. "We've got some analogue components that might build a basic transmitter, but nothing capable of overriding military-grade broadcast systems."

Jonnie turned back to the schematics, studying them with new intensity. Somewhere in the technical specifications was a vulnerability. There had to be. No system was perfect and these arrays had been built in secret, quickly, without the usual redundancy testing. There—a notation in the maintenance protocols. There *was* their way in. "Look," he said, pointing to the screen. "We can't hack remotely, but if we could reach one of the arrays—physically reach it—there's a manual override capability."

"The arrays are in Scotland," Robyn pointed out. "They're heavily guarded United Nations military installations in the middle of nowhere. We're in London with less than two days until broadcast and no transportation."

"So, we find transportation," Suzanne said, but her voice lacked conviction.

They were so close. Closer than any Resistance cell had ever come. They had proof of the deception, knowledge of the system's architecture and a possible access point. They couldn't let something as simple as transportation stop them from succeeding.

"There's another option," Brian said slowly, thinking it through. "It's not ideal, but I think it's possible." The others looked at him expectantly. He pulled up a different schematic of the transmission infrastructure showing how the arrays broadcast to regional relay stations, which then amplified and distributed the signal locally. "We don't need to reach the northern arrays if we can reach a relay station. See how they all connect together? He traced his finger along the schematic. "There's a relay station in North London in the Muswell Hill area, disguised as a 6G telecommunications tower. The relay stations will have much lighter security than the primary arrays."

"They'll still have military-grade surveillance," Fernsby assessed, examining the location. "Automated defence systems, facial recognition. Probably drone patrols, right? But we could penetrate it. Maybe. With the right approach."

"And if we hijack the relay?" Jonnie asked.

"We could override local broadcasts. Not the global ones—the other relays would compensate. But for London and the surrounding areas? We could interrupt the alien narrative, broadcast the truth and show people the archived proof. We'd have maybe ten minutes before they shut us down. But that's ten minutes of truth reaching millions of people."

Ten minutes. And local, not global. Not enough to change the world. But enough to plant doubt. Enough to make people ask questions. Enough to start the crack that could eventually shatter the illusion.

"I don't know," Robyn said, shaking her head. "The moment we interrupt the broadcast, every security asset in London is going to converge on that relay station. We'd be trapped."

"Probably," Jonnie conceded. "So we'll plan an exit strategy. Hit the station, broadcast the files and evacuate before containment arrives."

"In ten minutes? Through military response protocols?" Robyn replied.

"Seven minutes," Fernsby corrected. "That's the average deployment time for rapid response teams in urban environments. We'd need to transmit in five minutes or less, have vehicles ready and scatter in multiple directions to divide pursuit."

They were planning the impossible again. But the impossible was all they had left.

Sarah had been silent throughout the revelation, holding Mae close. Now she spoke, her voice careful. "I might be able to help with the relay station." Everyone looked at her. "My clearance—my old clearance, before I joined the Resistance—included access to telecommunications infrastructure. Not military installations, but civilian networks. The relay station interfaces with both. If my credentials are still active, I could potentially create a temporary access window."

"They'd have revoked your access when you left your old job," Suzanne pointed out.

"Maybe. Or maybe not. I never officially resigned, so no paperwork was ever filed. And I was low-level enough that my absence might not have triggered a full security review. It's possible my digital ghost still exists in the system."

It was a long shot. Everything they had was a long shot. But Sarah's offer provided something they'd lacked: an inside angle. Even a partial credential could

reduce security response time and create the opening they needed.

"We'd need to verify without alerting the Global State you're attempting access," Fernsby said.

"I can do that," Sarah replied. "Test the credentials remotely and see if they're still valid. If they are, I think I can use them to disable select security measures. Cameras, alarms, facial recognition protocols—things like that. It would give you a window."

Jonnie studied her. She was volunteering to expose herself—digitally, if not physically—to protect the mission. The risk was enormous. If the Global State detected her access attempt, they'd trace her location, deploy teams and end the Resistance in an efficient sweep.

"Do it," Suzanne decided. "But carefully. One wrong move and we're all sitting in Psycho-Eval chairs learning to love Big Brother."

Sarah nodded and reached for one of the air-gapped laptops. Mae settled beside her, drawing quietly while her mother worked.

Jonnie helped Ahmed construct an analogue broadcaster using components Suzanne had got from the Merchant. It was beautiful in its simplicity—copper wire, vacuum tubes, circuit boards unmarked by tracking chips—technology from an era before surveillance.

"This will work," Ahmed said. His damaged mind seemed clearer when working with physical systems, as if the tactile nature of analogue equipment bypassed his neural damage. "The signal strength won't match the northern arrays, but for a local broadcast, it'll be good."

Jonnie watched Ahmed's hands, noticing the absence of the tremor that had plagued him when he attempted digital decryption. "It's the analogue that saves you," Jonnie realised aloud. "The Global State targeted the digital pathways in your brain—the complexity, the encryption, the data routes—that was the virus in the system the Oracle warned about. They tried to fix your 'faulty wetware' hacking skills with obedience protocols. But they left the basic, physical logic untouched."

Ahmed looked up, something flickering in his eyes. Not hope, exactly. But recognition. "The simple stuff. The foundational thinking."

"Yeah. They carved out the advanced skills but couldn't erase the bedrock. You can still reason. Still process. You just can't access the complex layers they targeted."

"So, I'm " Ahmed's voice cracked. "I'm not completely gone."

"No, mate. You're not gone. You're injured. And maybe maybe we can work around the injury."

Ahmed nodded, focusing on the coils of wire. "Yeah. AI operates entirely in the digital realm. It predicts digital attacks and adapts to digital vulnerabilities. It can't predict this. It can't see copper and vacuum tubes. This technology is obsolete to them. It's invisible."

"It's our structural advantage," Jonnie murmured. "They built a perfect, all-seeing digital cage, but they left the analogue skeleton exposed. They stopped monitoring this old infrastructure decades ago, deeming it irrelevant to their high-frequency, complex digital control. That neglect is our key."

"How long to construct that thing?" Brian asked, looking up from his laptop.

"We need every minute we've got. It'll be tight."

"Then don't let me interrupt you."

They worked through the day, through the evening, into the night. Sarah's credential check came back positive, a bureaucratic oversight that might save their lives. Brian worked on compiling the archive into a five-minute presentation showing schematics and documentation—undeniable proof of Project Blue Beam's existence. Fernsby and Robyn worked on routes into and out of the Muswell Hill relay station. Theirs was perhaps the most critical piece of work: if they couldn't get into the relay station, everything they were doing would be for nothing.

By midnight that night, they had something approximating a plan: a plan that had around sixty points of failure, any one of which could end with their capture, or worse. But it was a plan.

"Let's get some rest," Suzanne ordered. "We've still got a lot to do tomorrow and we can't do it if we can't think straight."

Jonnie tried. He lay on a salvaged office chair in the corner and closed his eyes, but his racing mind kept returning to the schematics. The northern arrays. The relay station. The seven-minute window between broadcast and capture.

Sarah found him around 01.30. "Can't sleep either?"

"I keep feeling like I've missed something. Some critical detail that'll get us all killed."

She sat beside him without asking, close enough that their shoulders touched. The contact was grounding.

"You know what I can't stop thinking about?" Sarah's voice was barely above a whisper, careful not to wake Mae, who was sleeping nearby. "What she'll remember about me. If this goes wrong. If I don't come back."

Jonnie turned his head to see her staring at her daughter's sleeping form. "She's seven," Sarah continued. "That's old enough to remember. But what will she remember? Her mum always running, always scared, always looking over her shoulder? Or will she remember the good bits—the stories I tell her in the dark, the way I hum when I brush her hair, that time we found a stray cat in Hackney and kept it for three days before it ran off?" Her voice cracked slightly on the last word.

"She'll remember you loved her," Jonnie said. "That's what matters."

"Is it?" Sarah's laugh was bitter. "Love kept her in hiding. Love kept her from seeing more daylight, from having friends, from being a normal child. Sometimes I wonder if the kindest thing would've been to register her, chip her, let her be absorbed into the system. At least then she'd have a childhood."

"You don't mean that, love."

"No. But I think it anyway. Every time she asks why she can't go outside. Every time she draws a blue sky she hardly ever sees." Sarah wiped at her eyes roughly. "I tell myself I'm protecting her. But maybe I'm just selfish. Maybe I'm keeping her free because I can't bear the alternative, not because it's what's best for her."

Jonnie shifted, turned to face her properly. "Sarah, you gave up everything for her. Your whole life. That's not selfish."

"Isn't it? I made a choice for her before she could make it herself. I chose resistance over safety. And now she'll never have a normal life, never be able to just exist without fear. Because of me."

"Because of the Global State," Jonnie corrected gently. "You're not the one who built the surveillance grid. You're not the one who demands children be chipped and tracked and absorbed into their system. You just refused to comply."

"And my refusal made her life harder."

"Your refusal kept her human."

Sarah stared at Mae. When she spoke again, her voice was raw. "What about you? What are you afraid of losing?"

Jonnie followed her gaze to the sleeping child, then looked at Sarah—really looked at her. The auburn hair tied back, the tired eyes, the way her hand never stopped moving to check her pocket—that nervous tic he'd noticed, but never questioned.

"Honestly?" He exhaled slowly. "I'm afraid I've already lost it. My family. My brother, Joey. His daughter, who'll be born in March and never know Uncle Jonnie existed. My mum's Sunday roasts. My dad's terrible jokes. Normal conversations that don't involve surveillance protocols and extraction plans." He paused, surprised by the words coming out. "But mostly, I'm afraid of forgetting what any of that felt like. My life before the alien hoax, when digital compliance was still voluntary. Of becoming so focused on survival that I lose the part of me that remembers why survival matters."

Sarah's hand found his in the darkness, fingers threading through his without hesitation. "You won't forget," she said softly. "You're not built like that. You still care too much. It's why you went back for Ahmed and Billy. Why you're risking everything for this broadcast. You could've stayed hidden, kept running out there, saved yourself. But you didn't."

"Neither did you."

"I had Mae. I didn't have a choice."

"You had a choice. You could've complied. Could've gotten your food rations and heating credits and safe little life. Plenty of people did."

Sarah's grip tightened on his hand. "I couldn't. The moment they said they'd chip her, put a tracker in my baby's hand before she could even understand what it meant " She swallowed hard. "I looked at her tiny fingers and I just couldn't. Even if it meant running forever."

They sat in silence, hands clasped, both watching Mae breathe. The warehouse was quiet except for the distant hum of drones on patrol and Brian's occasional shuffling of papers across the room.

"Jonnie," Sarah said finally, voice barely audible. "I've asked you before and I'm asking again. If something goes wrong—if I don't make it out—promise, you'll take care of Mae."

"Nothing's going wrong." His voice lacked conviction.

"Promise again anyway." She turned to face him. The fear in her eyes was raw, naked, devastating. "She likes you. She doesn't trust easily—hasn't had reason to—but she trusts you. If I don't come back, if they get me, she'll need someone who remembers she's not just a Blacklisted child or a Resistance liability. Someone who sees her as a person."

"Sarah—"

"Please." Her voice broke. "I need to know someone will tell her I loved her. That I didn't run because I was brave, that I ran because I couldn't imagine a world where she wasn't free. Even if that freedom meant poverty and hiding and fear."

Jonnie's chest tightened. He squeezed her hand, held her gaze. "I promise. But you'll be here for her. We both will."

"You don't know that."

"No. But I choose to believe it anyway. Because the alternative is giving up before we've even started."

Sarah's smile was small and sad. "Inspiring. Should put it on T-shirts next to Robyn's motto about chaos."

"Yours would sell better. More hopeful."

"Hope's dangerous."

"So's despair. At least hope gets you moving."

She smiled and leaned into him then, head resting against his shoulder. He could feel her trembling. Maybe it was exhaustion, maybe it was fear. Maybe it was the weight of two years of running finally catching up. "What happens after?" she whispered. "If we actually pull this off? If we expose the hoax and make people see the truth?"

"I don't know. Probably chaos. Probably backlash. The Global State won't just surrender because we've embarrassed them."

"But Mae could go outside. See real sky. Not through dirty windows or in pictures. Actually stand under it, safe and free."

"Yeah, she could."

"That's worth it then. Whatever happens to me that's worth it."

Jonnie turned his head and pressed a kiss to her hair. He did it without thinking. If you'd asked him, he wouldn't have been able to tell you what he'd meant by it—reassurance, maybe. But it crossed a line they'd been carefully avoiding for weeks.

"You're worth it too," he said quietly. "Not just what you can give Mae. You."

Sarah went very still. When she lifted her head to look at him, her eyes were bright with unshed tears. "Don't," she whispered. "Don't make this harder than it already is."

"Make what harder?"

But she didn't answer. She just looked at him with something that might've been longing or might've been grief. Then she pulled away gently, breaking contact. "We should try to sleep," she said, voice carefully neutral. "Lots to do tomorrow."

"Sarah—"

"Please. Just let it be enough that you promised to take care of Mae." She stood and moved back to where her daughter slept, lying down beside the small form. She pulled Mae close. Protective. Final.

Jonnie felt the absence of her warmth like a physical loss. Something was wrong. Something in the way she'd looked at him, in the way she'd pulled away, in her desperate request about Mae. He couldn't put his finger on it, but something was off.

But exhaustion was clawing at him and his eyes fluttered closed. So he told himself he was imagining things. Told himself everything was fine.

Chapter 16

The Oracle's Map

Mae woke screaming at 03.12. Her primal terror cut through the quiet night like a blade. Sarah was beside her daughter instantly, holding the small body and whispering reassurances.

Jonnie had already been awake, staring at the ceiling tiles. He bolted across the room as Robyn and Fernsby emerged from their own corners with weapons drawn before realising there wasn't a threat.

"It's alright, love," Sarah murmured, rocking Mae gently. "Just a dream. You're safe. Mummy's here."

"She's not awake," Jonnie pointed out.

"I know. It's the Oracle. When the visions come this strong, she goes somewhere I can't follow."

Mae's open eyes stared at something beyond their own perception. Her lips moved almost soundlessly.

Ahmed had joined them, his bandaged hand held carefully against his chest. "What's she saying?"

They leaned closer, trying to decipher the whispered syllables. Mae's voice was barely audible, each word emerging with visible effort. "Under the eye through the blind where old wires cross " She lapsed into silence before resuming. "Seventeen down forgotten door the map map "

Her body went rigid, back arching, and for a terrifying moment, Jonnie thought she was having a seizure. Then Mae gasped, drew in a shuddering breath, and collapsed against her mother. "Mae?" Sarah's voice cracked with fear. "Baby, can you hear me?"

The girl's eyes focused slowly, recognition returning in stages. "Mummy?"

"I'm here. You're safe."

"I saw it." Mae's voice was hoarse, older than seven years should allow. "The Oracle showed me the way. I saw the map."

Everyone had assembled by now. They formed a circle around the mother and child, watching as Mae struggled to articulate whatever vision had seized her.

"What did you see?" Brian asked gently, kneeling to Mae's eye level.

"A place under the city. Old tunnels in the sewers where the first wires were laid. The Oracle says the relay station was built on top of the old buildings. They had to keep the old doors. They're hidden, but still there."

Fernsby's interest sharpened. "Old doors? Do you think that means the manual access points for the telecoms infrastructure?" Mae gave a tired nod "Do you know from when?"

"Long ago, when there was a queen," Mae answered. "From the time of the first wires. They built the city on bones. The Oracle says bones remember."

"That's the Victorian era, innit?" Fernsby pulled out his scanner and called up the architectural databases. "Many of those old tunnels still exist. Over the decades, when they upgraded the telecoms, they often built new installations over the existing infrastructure rather than demolishing it. Cost savings, like. But those old access tunnels are still there, just sealed up and forgotten. And, they're often not included in modern security protocols."

"Assuming this old manual access point still exists," Robyn cautioned, "we're talking about tunnels that are a hundred and fifty years old, or more. They could've collapsed, been filled in or blocked by modern construction."

"The Oracle says no." Mae had regained some composure, although she still trembled in Sarah's arms. "I need to draw the map and show you the way." She reached for her charcoal and paper. Her small hands moved with surprising confidence, sketching lines that formed streets, junctions and landmarks. "Here," she said, tapping a point on her map. "It's an old station. There's a passage behind the platform. You need to go seventeen steps down, then left where the old wires run. Follow the copper until you reach the spot marked with white stone. That's where the tunnel connects to where you need to go."

The drawing was remarkably detailed for a child's work. Fernsby studied it and compared it to his scanner's display of the relay station's documented layout, as well as known schematics of the structures and tunnels in the area. "She's right," he said. "Look, the old station must be the abandoned Alexandra Palace station. This platform must be the northern platform—see, you can trace the path of a service passage here that matches what Mae's drawn. This bit here must be the Victorian tunnel because there's nothing that corresponds to any blueprint. But if you look here, the relay station's foundation shows an irregular depth on the eastern side. I thought at first it was just a geological variance, but if there's a void beneath, like an old tunnel they built over rather than filled "

"It's our way in," Suzanne finished. "One that bypasses every security measure they've installed."

"The Oracle doesn't lie," Mae said. "Sometimes it speaks in riddles because the machine listens. I can take you there and show you the door."

"Absolutely not," Sarah said immediately. "You're not going anywhere near a military installation."

"But I know the way—"

"You've drawn the way. That's enough." Sarah's voice brooked no argument. "Jonnie and the others can follow your map. You stay here where it's safe."

Mae looked like she wanted to argue, but she gave in and buried her head against her mother's shoulder. The vision had clearly exhausted her.

"We should check this out before we commit to using it," Robyn said.

"I'll go," Jonnie volunteered. "The Alexandra Palace station's what, ninety minutes from here? I can scout the location, confirm the access point exists, and be back before dawn."

"Not alone," Suzanne decreed. "We've lost too many people to solo operations. Take Fernsby. His surveillance expertise might spot security we'd miss."

Fernsby nodded. "Give me twenty minutes to prep gear and map optimal approach routes."

While Fernsby prepared, Jonnie studied Mae's drawing more carefully. "You believe her," Sarah said quietly, joining him. Mae had finally fallen back into an exhausted sleep. "The visions. The Oracle. Most people think she's disturbed, traumatised by growing up underground."

"Most people haven't seen her drawings come true," Jonnie replied. "How long has she been like this?"

"Since she was four. It started with nightmares, then drawings that predicted things—drone patrol routes, safehouse compromises, locations of sympathisers. I thought I was going mad, seeing patterns that weren't there. But we started checking Mae's predictions against actual events. Seventy-three per cent accuracy."

"That's statistically impossible without some sort of psychic ability. Or access to classified intel."

"I can't explain what she does, or how she does it."

"Does it frighten you? That your daughter sees things others can't?"

"It terrifies me. But it also keeps her alive. Keeps us all alive." Sarah's hand stroked Mae's hair with automatic gentleness. "Maybe the question isn't where the information comes from. Maybe it's if you can trust someone whose mind works in ways you can't fully understand." She looked into Jonnie's eyes. "I'd give anything for her to have a normal childhood. School, friends, worrying about homework instead of the Oracle. But normal disappeared a long time ago. Now we survive however we can."

Fernsby approached, pack bulging with equipment. "Ready when you are."

The journey to Alexandra Palace took longer than expected. Drone activity had intensified, forcing detours through exclusion zones where the surveillance was lighter, but the terrain was more difficult. They reached the abandoned station at 05.23, with perhaps ninety minutes before dawn made movement too risky.

The station was exactly as Mae had drawn it. The platforms were overgrown with weeds, the ticket hall collapsed. Fernsby swept the area with his scanner while Jonnie located the northern platform and found the door to the service passage behind it.

"No active surveillance here," Fernsby confirmed. "Location's too remote, too forgotten. They're not wasting monitoring resources on abandoned infrastructure."

"Which makes it perfect for us."

The service passage was narrow and damp, smelling of earth and decay. Just yards in from the door, they encountered stairs leading down into the dark. At the bottom of the seventeenth step, the tunnel branched. Jonnie shone his torch beam at the ceiling of the tunnel and caught the glint of old copper wiring—the

telegraph cables Mae had mentioned, still present after more than a century. They followed the copper left at the junction, feet splashing through puddles.

They walked for about five minutes before they found a pale limestone block set into the brick wall. Behind it—not immediately, visible but detectable with careful inspection—was a void. A space where brick should be, but wasn't. Jonnie pressed against the wall. It gave slightly, old mortar crumbling. "It's here. The access point. Hidden, but not sealed."

"Can you open it?"

"Give me a minute." He pried loose bricks free, mortar crumbling under his fingertips. Beyond them, darkness yawned. Air wafted out, stale but not dead, suggesting the passage wasn't completely sealed at the other end. "I can't see far. I can't tell where it goes," Jonnie said, shining his torch into the darkness. "But the relay station is in that direction. And Mae's been right about everything so far. So I guess there's a way in."

Fernsby was already photographing the entrance, documenting approach routes. "With this access, we can bypass surface security entirely. We'll be able to emerge inside their perimeter."

"Assuming the tunnel's intact all the way. Assuming there aren't modern barriers we can't penetrate. Assuming—"

"Assuming nothing," Fernsby cut him off. "We do what we always do: we plan for the best, prepare for the worst, and improvise the rest."

They repacked the bricks so that a casual inspection wouldn't reveal the tampering. By the time they retraced their route, the sun was rising.

Back at the safehouse, they reported to Suzanne. "The access point exists," Jonnie confirmed. "Mae's map is accurate. We have a way into the relay station that bypasses their security."

"The Global State has scheduled their alien hoax broadcast for tomorrow at 15.00. We have a way in, but will we be ready?" Suzanne asked.

"Yes. I'll be finished with the data package by the end of today," Brian said.

"And I'm almost done with the transmitter. It's not elegant and the range is limited—maybe fifteen miles—but for London and the surrounding areas, it will work. It still needs final calibration, but we'll be done in time."

"Then we're a go for tomorrow." Suzanne's decision carried the weight of inevitability.

Jonnie felt a flutter of nerves in his stomach. Outside, the city was waking to another day of surveillance and control, citizens moving through their choreographed routines under the algorithmic observation of the surveillance state. They had no idea that in a little more than thirty hours, everything would change.

Chapter 17

The Unspoken Cost

The condemned building's third floor had a window that hadn't been completely boarded over. Jonnie found himself there around 16.00, staring out at London's smog, while his mind churned through probabilities and paranoia.

Mae's Oracle map had been too perfect. Too detailed. Too conveniently timed.

"You're thinking too loud." Sarah's voice came from behind him, soft enough not to startle him, but close enough that she'd clearly been watching him. "I can hear the gears grinding from across the room."

He didn't turn immediately. "Just going over the plan. Making sure we haven't missed anything."

"That's not what your face says." She moved to stand beside him, close enough that he could feel her warmth in the building's permanent chill. "Your face says you're questioning something fundamental."

"Maybe I am." Silence stretched between them, neither comfortable nor hostile. Just weighted. "The Oracle," Jonnie finally said, still watching the street below. "Mae's visions. They're remarkably convenient, aren't they?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, we're planning a nearly impossible op and suddenly Mae has a vision that provides the exact information we need—a hidden access point that's not on any schematics. And she doesn't just tell us about it, she draws us a map, down to the step count and directional markers. That's that's *intel*, not prophecy."

"You think Mae's lying?" Sarah's voice was carefully neutral.

"I think Mae believes what she's telling us. But believing in something doesn't mean it's real. Kids believe in Father Christmas and the Easter Bunny—or at least,

they used to." Jonnie finally turned to face her. "How does a child know architectural details about Victorian telegraph tunnels?"

"I don't know."

"Where does the Oracle's information actually come from, Sarah?"

"It's prophecy."

"Do you believe that? Really?" He studied her face, looking for tells. "You're too intelligent to accept supernatural explanations without questioning them. So, either you're lying to yourself about what Mae can do, or you're lying to us."

Sarah's jaw tightened. "What are you suggesting?"

"I'm suggesting that information this precise has to come from somewhere—intelligence networks, archived blueprints. Someone has to be feeding Mae data and making her believe it's mystical guidance." He paused. "Someone with access to the Global State databases who could pull structural info about telecoms infrastructure."

"Someone like me, you mean."

"You said your credentials were still active. You accessed the Global State system to check. What else did you access while you were in there?"

"I checked authentication protocols. That's all."

"That's all you'll admit to."

Sarah shook her head. "You think I'm working for them. That I'm some kind of plant. Feeding you false intel while Mae plays mystic and you all dance to the Global State's tune."

"Are you?" Jonnie pulled out his phone and pulled up the frequency scanner logs he'd been keeping. "Because I've got evidence that says something's very wrong. There's this one point seven gig low-frequency transmission that just keeps showing up. Intelligence-grade, according to Fernsby."

He showed her the screen. He had days of logged readings, time-stamped and location-marked. Every spike was documented. "This signal's been broadcasting from our cell since the print shop. I've been tracking it for four days. Want to guess where the strongest signal concentration is?"

Sarah's face blanked. "That's not—"

"Within five feet of you or Mae. Every time. Admittedly, sometimes it just disappears, but still. I checked at the print shop. Checked here. When the signal

does appear, it seems to be concentrated around the two of you. It's either embedded in you, embedded in Mae, or it's in something you're carrying."

"I don't have anything—"

"Don't you? Or maybe you don't know you do. Maybe they implanted something during one of Mae's childhood checkups years ago and you're covering for her. Or maybe " He couldn't believe he was about to say this. "Maybe you know exactly what it is and you've been reporting our location."

Sarah stared at the logs. "I would never—"

"I thought, at first, that Ahmed's chip was to blame. But we got that out quickly and long before we got to the print shop safe house. Then I thought that maybe there was a second embedded tracker on him. But Fernsby did another scan with a more sensitive scanner. He found nothing. So no, Ahmed's not to blame.

"And then there was the depot trap." Jonnie pulled up another log entry. "The mysterious signal spiked not long before the response teams arrived. This signal—your signal—it explains everything."

"You said the signal is concentrated around me and Mae, right? Well then how do you explain it being at the depot? Neither of us was there."

Okay, she had a point. "Maybe you followed us."

Sarah laughed. It sounded hard and angry. "This is what they do, you know. The surveillance state. It doesn't just watch, it makes you watch each other. Turns every alliance into suspicion, every trust into potential betrayal. You're doing their work for them.

"Or I'm doing what's necessary before we commit to an op that might walk us into getting killed." Jonnie kept his voice level and clinical. "Every move we make seems to be anticipated. And now Mae's Oracle conveniently provides intel that's too good to be true?"

"You want me to explain prophecy with logic?" Sarah took a step towards him, crowding his personal space. "If I'm the bad guy, why would I volunteer my credentials to help you access the relay station?"

"To build trust. To position yourself as indispensable so that when you do betray us, it's catastrophic." He hated saying it, hated the look on her face, but paranoia kept you alive. "It's textbook infiltration. Provide genuine help, establish credibility, then leverage that trust for maximum damage."

"You've thought this through." Her voice had gone very quiet.

"I've thought everything through. That's my job. I see patterns, identify vulnerabilities and protect the cell from compromise."

"And I'm a vulnerability."

"You're an unknown. Which in our situation is the same thing."

Sarah turned away, staring out the gap in the plywood. Her shoulders were stiff, her hands clenched at her sides. When she spoke again, her voice carried edges Jonnie hadn't heard before. "My daughter can do things I don't understand. That's the truth. She sees patterns in data I can't perceive, makes connections that shouldn't be possible for a kid. Maybe it's some kind of savant syndrome. Maybe it's exposure to surveillance networks doing something to her. Maybe it's prophecy. Honestly, I don't know."

She turned back to face him. "But I do know that Mae's visions have kept us alive. Seventy-three per cent accuracy predicting drone patrols, safehouse compromises, sympathiser locations. Robyn tracked it. Brian verified it. Those predictions saved lives long before you joined this cell."

"Which proves Mae has access to information. It doesn't prove the source is mystical."

"What do you want from me, Jonnie? Some proof of loyalty? Is there some test I can pass to earn your trust?"

"I want the truth. Where does Mae's information really come from?"

"I don't know!" The words came out sharp and frustrated. "I've asked her. I've asked the Oracle through her. All I get are riddles about bones remembering and walls having eyes and the system eating itself. If you want clear answers, you're interrogating the wrong person."

"Am I?" Jonnie pressed. "Because from where I'm standing, the only person with motive and access to feed Mae intelligence disguised as prophecy is you. You've got active credentials. You know the Resistance's operational details. You're positioned perfectly to be a control handler."

Sarah's composure finally cracked. "You think I'd use my daughter as an intel asset? Traumatise her with surveillance responsibility at seven years old? What kind of mother do you think I am?"

"I think you're a mother who'd do anything to protect her child. Including betraying the Resistance cell that's offered you refuge if the Global State offered the right price."

Sarah recoiled and, for a moment, Jonnie thought she might strike him. Instead, she laughed again. But the bitter, broken sound held no humour whatsoever. "You're right," she said quietly. "I would do anything to protect Mae. Lie, betray, kill—anything. She's seen things no child should see, known fear no child should know. If the Global State offered me a deal—her safety in exchange for your locations—I'd have to think very carefully before refusing.

"But they haven't offered that deal," Sarah continued. "If they had, you'd already be in Psycho-Eval chairs having your minds wiped clean. The fact that you're still free, still operational, still planning to overthrow the Global State. That's your proof. Not perfect proof, I know. But it's what I've got."

Jonnie wanted to believe her. Desperately. Because the alternative—that he'd been developing feelings for a woman actively betraying him—was too painful to contemplate. But belief without verification was how Resistance cells got slaughtered. "Show me," he said.

"Show you what?"

"How Mae receives the Oracle's messages. The actual process. Let me observe it, see if there's any external input we're missing."

Sarah studied him for a long moment. "You want to interrogate my daughter."

"I want to understand the mechanism. If Mae's genuinely prophetic, then observing her won't hurt. If she's being fed intelligence through channels we haven't identified, we need to know."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then I report my suspicions to Suzanne and let her make the call. But either way, Sarah, we're less than twenty-four hours from the most dangerous operation ever attempted. If we're compromised, we need to know now."

He didn't mean to be cruel, but trust had to be earned, especially when lives depended on it. Sarah seemed to understand this, even as her expression reflected the hurt of being doubted. "Fine," she said finally. "Tonight, when Mae's Oracle time comes—usually around 21.00—you can observe. Watch for external signals, electronic interference, whatever you're looking for. But Jonnie—if you do this, if

you interrogate my daughter looking for betrayal—there's no coming back from it. Even if you find nothing."

"I know."

"Do you? I'm not sure you do. Right now, we should be coordinating, finalising plans and supporting each other. Instead, you're investigating me like I'm the enemy. Tell me, Jonnie: when did you start seeing threats in everyone who gets close?"

She left before he could answer. Which was just as well, because Jonnie didn't have an answer. Or rather, he had too many. When had suspicion become his default?

Robyn found him an hour later, still staring out the window. "Heard you and Sarah had words," she said without preamble.

"Does everyone know?"

"Building's got thin walls and you weren't exactly whispering." Robyn leant against the doorframe. "For what it's worth, I've had the same thoughts. About Sarah and Mae. About how convenient their intelligence is."

"Have you said anything?"

"No. Because I've also watched Sarah risk her life for this cell repeatedly. Watched Mae have nightmares that leave her screaming for hours. You can fake loyalty, but you can't fake that kind of trauma." Robyn paused. "Unless you can and they're both better actors than any operative has any right to be."

"That's helpful."

"I'm not here to be helpful. I'm here to remind you that paranoia is survival, but paranoia without evidence is just destruction." She straightened. "You want to investigate Mae's Oracle? Fine. But do it properly. Scientifically. Not as punishment for Sarah getting close to you."

"That's not what this is—"

"Isn't it?" Robyn's look was sharp. "You've been watching her for weeks. The way you look at her, the way you position yourself near her in group meetings. You fancy her. And now you're terrified of your feelings, so you're lashing out. Push her away now, before she can betray you."

"That's not—"

"Save it." Robyn moved towards the stairs. "Just remember, tomorrow we walk into a military installation armed with analogue equipment and hope. We need unity, not suspicion. Whatever you discover about Sarah tonight, deal with it quickly and quietly. Because if the cell fractures now, the Global State wins without firing a shot."

She left Jonnie alone with his thoughts and the yellow light slanting through broken boards.

At 21.00, he stationed himself near where Mae slept, notepad ready, attention focused. Sarah sat with her daughter, radiating cold anger that needed no words to communicate. Mae's eyes moved beneath closed lids—REM sleep, or something else? Her fingers twitched, tracing patterns on the blanket. Her lips moved soundlessly. Jonnie watched for electronic interference, for Sarah making subtle gestures, for any indication of external communication. Fernsby's scanner sat beside him, monitoring frequencies and searching for data transmission.

But there was nothing. Just a child sleeping restlessly while her mother watched with exhausted vigilance.

After forty minutes, Mae sat bolt upright, gasped, and spoke, "The Oracle says the doubter sees truth, but misses. Three eyes are watching, but the third blinks green. The Ghost cannot run. Trust is the weapon they cannot predict." Then she collapsed back into sleep, leaving Jonnie with riddles instead of answers.

The third blinks green.

Jonnie's breath caught. The words detonated something in his memory. He was back at the print shop, staring at his laptop screen, watching that impossible green portal materialise in the system architecture. Three seconds of open access. Three seconds where the AI had dangled hope before snatching it away. And the message that appeared across his screen:

HELLO, JONNIE VILLIN. CLEARANCE LEVEL 5. FLAGGED. TERMINATED. ENEMY OF THE GLOBAL STATE. YOU WERE ALWAYS GOING TO FAIL.

A green light mocking him. The taunt from the system. The AI had spoken to him directly.

"Jonnie?" Sarah's voice pulled him back to the present. "You've gone white."

He stared at Mae's sleeping form, his mind racing through implications that made his skin crawl. *The third blinks green.* Mae's Oracle had just referenced his

most private moment of technological terror—the instant when he'd realised the system wasn't just code, but something that thought, adapted and anticipated. Something that had looked at him directly and promised his failure.

"How did she know that?" His voice came out strangled. "The green portal. The message. I never told anyone. Robyn wasn't there. Brian didn't see it. Only I experienced it."

Sarah frowned. "Experienced what?"

"The AI." Jonnie's hands were shaking. "When I was trying to hack the broadcast system at the print shop, it showed me a green access portal. It let me see it just long enough to give me hope, then closed it and sent me a message. It told me I'd always been going to fail."

"Jonnie, Mae wasn't there—"

"That's my point!" His voice rose despite himself. "Nobody else was there. Mae was in the other room. There's no way she could know about the green light."

Sarah's look was withering. "Satisfied now? See any signals? Any evidence of manipulation?"

He hadn't. Which proved nothing—technology existed that the scanner couldn't detect. But it also didn't prove guilt.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "For doubting you. For hurting you. For—"

"For being exactly what the Global State wants you to be? Paranoid. Isolated. Incapable of trust." Sarah's mouth twisted into a bitter line. "If you don't mind, my daughter needs some sleep." She looked pointedly at the far corner.

Jonnie walked away slowly, his mind echoing with doubts and a prophecy he didn't understand.

Chapter 18

The Go Signal

The safehouse at 06.00 smelled of regular instant coffee and the tension that comes from people who know they're about to do something irreversible.

Jonnie sat at the scarred wooden table watching Ahmed make final calibrations to the broadcaster. The device looked absurd in daylight with its vacuum tubes and copper wire, like something excavated from a museum.

"Signal strength optimal," Ahmed reported, not looking up from his multi-meter. His hands were steady—steadier than Jonnie's and steadier than they had any right to be, given what he'd survived in the Psycho-Eval chair. "Transmission range verified at an eighteen-mile radius. Once you connect this to the relay station, London will see everything we've compiled."

"For five minutes," Jonnie said.

"Five minutes and forty seconds, to be exact. The compressed archive contains the full Project Blue Beam docs—architectural schematics, procurement records and internal communications. Everything Brian assembled. Everything that proves the alien hoax."

Jonnie nodded, although his mind wasn't processing technical specifications. It was stuck on a different calculation: the probability of capture versus the probability of success. The maths wasn't in their favour either way.

Across the room, Robyn was sharpening her knife with the kind of focus that suggested she was prepared for violence. The blade caught the morning light filtering through cracks in the boarded-up windows, throwing brief reflections across plasterboard walls.

She felt Jonnie watching and looked up. "You having second thoughts?"

"I've been having second thoughts since we started planning this."

"But you're going anyway."

"Yeah."

"Why?" She seemed genuinely curious. Robyn had the blunt honesty of someone who'd stopped pretending social niceties mattered.

Jonnie considered the question. Why risk everything for a broadcast that might reach millions, but would, at best, convince perhaps a fraction of them? The smart play was to scatter, survive and wait for a better opportunity.

"Because if we don't," he said finally, "then Ahmed's torture meant nothing. Billy's death meant nothing. Every person who's been Blacklisted or mind-wiped or driven to suicide by the lies of this system they all suffered for nothing. At least this way, there's a chance their suffering had purpose."

Robyn studied him. "That's not why you're going. That's the reason you tell yourself to make it feel noble."

"Then why am I going?"

"Because you can't live with being the man who ran instead of fighting. Because your brother's having a baby and you want that baby to be born into a world where someone tried to expose the lie, even if they failed. Because you're in love with Sarah and this is the only way to prove you trust her." She resumed sharpening the blade. "Pick whichever reason makes you feel better. They're all true."

Jonnie's first instinct was to argue, but Robyn was right. His reasons were a tangled mix of moral conviction, personal pride and desperate hope. "What about you? Why are you going?"

Robyn's knife stopped moving. She didn't look at him. "Rachel." She resumed sharpening, the sound of metal on stone harsh.

Sarah emerged from a back room where Mae was still sleeping. She hesitated, as if trying to decide whether or not to approach him. He'd hurt her last night by questioning Mae's visions and demanding proof of loyalty that couldn't be given. He wished he didn't feel this way; he wished he could eliminate all doubt. Mind apparently made up, Sarah walked slowly towards him, her footsteps heavy. "Good morning, Jonnie." He forced his lips into a smile, but couldn't bring himself to return her greeting. A sound escaped her before she pressed her lips into a thin

line. "You still don't trust me. I don't know what else I can do to prove my loyalty." She looked down, worrying at her lip with her teeth. "You don't want me on this mission."

"No, Sarah, I do." Jonnie raised his hand to reach out to her, but dropped it back in his lap. "You're essential to the mission. Your credentials—"

"Can be provided remotely. I don't need to be physically present at the relay station. The only reason Suzanne included me in the infiltration team is because I volunteered. But if my presence makes you doubt every decision, I'll stay back with Mae."

It was Jonnie's turn to press his lips tightly together. He had to make a decision: did he trust Sarah, or not? He couldn't keep letting suspicion poison their every interaction. "I'm sorry," he said finally. "For hurting you. For investigating Mae like she's an intel asset instead of a traumatised child. For making you prove your loyalty."

"But you still suspect me."

He sighed deeply. "I suspect everyone. That's not personal—it's survival."

"I get it. I do." Sarah's expression held something between pity and frustration. "But paranoia isolates you. And isolated people don't build successful resistance movements. They just survive slightly longer before the machine grinds them down anyway."

Jonnie smiled wryly, recognising the truth of Sarah's words. "Truce?"

"If that's all you can offer for now, I guess I'll take it." She held out her hand. Jonnie hesitated for just a moment before accepting it. Instead of shaking it, he squeezed her hand gently, wishing he could use it to tug Sarah into his arms and just forget about everything that had happened over the past twenty-four hours; forget about the nagging doubts that wouldn't leave him alone.

Sarah seemed to be oblivious to his roiling thoughts, because the smile she gave him when she pulled her hand free was genuine. "You need to see this," she said, pulling a piece of folded paper from her pocket and smoothing it out on the table next to where they were standing. It was one of Mae's charcoal drawings depicting a group of four figures. But half the figures were shaded dark, while the other half were outlined, but devoid of shading.

"What does it mean?"

Sarah wouldn't meet his eye. "It means we won't all make it. But Mae won't tell me who survives," Sarah said. "She said the Oracle shows her possibilities, not certainties, and that we choose which version becomes real."

Jonnie studied the drawing. Half survive. Half don't. "You'll be okay," he said, although he had no idea if that was true or not.

"I hope so. But even if we fail, even if I don't make it back, she needs to know her mother fought."

The door to the main room banged opened, causing everyone to jump. "Sorry," Fernsby apologised as he shouldered through the reverberating door, arms laden down with equipment bags. "Scanner's ready. Security bypass tools too. I've mapped every camera blind spot within three blocks of the relay station, along with every drone patrol pattern and every biometric checkpoint we'll encounter."

"And?" Robyn asked.

"And we have a roughly forty per cent chance of reaching the control room undetected, sixty per cent chance of completing the broadcast, and twenty per cent chance of all making it out of there in one piece."

"Cheerful."

Fernsby pulled out a chair and straddled it. "What do you want me to tell you? I've spent months hunting people for the Global State, right? I know their protocols, their response times and their tactical procedures. Once we activate that broadcast, we'll have seven minutes before rapid deployment teams arrive. Seven minutes to transmit the truth, disconnect our equipment and get out of there while all hell rains down on us."

"You sound like you want to talk us out of it," Jonnie observed.

"I want you to understand what we're walking into. You can paint this as some heroic resistance effort, but be clear: this is tactical suicide with the slimmest of slim chances of making a meaningful impact." Fernsby's shoulders slumped. "But I'm going anyway, because I've already lost everything that made me who I was. My career, my identity, my certainty about which side deserves loyalty. The only thing I have left is the choice to make my end mean something."

Ahmed looked up from the broadcaster he was still tinkering with. "That's poetic for a drone operator."

"Former drone operator," Fernsby corrected. "Now I'm just another asset in a network I don't fully understand, commanded by people fighting for an outcome I can't predict." Fernsby's smile was bitter. "The irony isn't lost on me—I spent my career reducing humans to tracked targets and now I'm the target being tracked."

Brian emerged from what had probably been a corner office in the building's former life, but what they had taken to calling the archive room. He looked like he hadn't slept in days. "I've finished the transmission package," he announced, setting his laptop on the table. "Five minutes and forty seconds of compressed evidence. I've sequenced it for maximum impact, starting with the architectural proof, then moving to procurement documentation, before ending with internal communications discussing the alien narrative. By the time the Global State deploys its counter-messaging, millions will have seen documentation they can't easily discredit."

"I hope it'll all be worth it." Sarah didn't sound hopeful at all. "Do you think people will believe what they see?"

Brian was quiet for a moment, considering. "Some will. If I was being optimistic maybe twenty per cent will believe what they see. Thirty per cent will begin to question the official narrative, but they won't yet be convinced. The rest will reject it outright as some kind of hoax because accepting it would mean confronting how completely they've been manipulated." He looked around the room. "But that twenty per cent—those millions of people who suddenly understand that the alien contact was a hoax, they'll become immune to the official narrative. The Global State can suppress the evidence, deploy propaganda to counter our proof, even try to mindwipe the resisters. But they can't erase the knowledge from everyone who saw it. That doubt, once planted, will grow."

"Or we all die before we can even get the message out and nothing changes," Robyn said.

"Or that. But at least we died trying." Brian offered her a tired grin.

Suzanne joined them from the office she was using as a bedroom, navigating her wheelchair efficiently through the narrow doorway. Her presence immediately shifted the room's energy into an expectant mode. "Status," she said, not bothering with preamble.

Ahmed launched into the technical update, explaining how he and Brian would manage the broadcast from the safe house once Jonnie had triggered the

manual override at the relay station. Brian confirmed the archive's broadcast readiness. Fernsby outlined their security protocols. Suzanne listened without interruption, her expression unreadable.

Jonnie finished the briefing by summarising the tactical timeline: entry to the tunnels below the relay station at 13.00, broadcast activation at 15.01—exactly one minute after the Global State began their official broadcast to maximise the effect of the interruption—and exit by 15.08.

Suzanne sat unmoving when he stopped speaking, staring off into the distance for a full minute before she pulled her gaze back to the team. She looked at each of them in turn, holding their gaze before moving onto the next. Finally, she spoke. "I need you to understand, to all be very clear, that this operation will expose our network. Once you activate that broadcast, the Global State will deploy every resource in its very vast arsenal to identify every person responsible. They'll trace equipment signatures, analyse transmission patterns and cross-reference personnel movements. Within twenty-four hours, they'll have a preliminary target list. Within a couple of days, they'll begin rolling up safe houses and sending anyone they find to the nearest Psycho-Eval chair."

"We know," Jonnie said.

"Do you? Because I've spent two years building this network. Two years of careful recruitment and patient development. You're about to burn it all for five minutes of broadcast that might, *might*, convince a handful of people."

Jonnie felt anger burn up from his stomach. They were risking their lives to expose the truth, but Suzanne was worried about her precious network? But before his anger could spew out, Robyn spoke. "You're right. We're burning your network. And maybe it won't be for much. Maybe it won't be for anything at all." She leaned forward, getting in Suzanne's face. "But you know what? Your approach has got us bugger all either. How many more years, hmm? How many more years of careful recruitment before you'd have enough people to actually challenge the Global State? How many more years of patient development waiting for the perfect conditions that never arrive?"

Suzanne's eyes narrowed. "So, impatience justifies recklessness?"

"No. Desperation justifies risk. There's a difference." Robyn stared her down.

The muscles in Suzanne's jaw bunched. Then she broke eye contact. "You're not wrong," she admitted. "Sometimes patience is not that far from timidity. Perhaps I've been hiding behind my commitment to my own cell." She looked around the table. "You'll all have to scatter after the broadcast and go into hiding. We'll lose people, locations, years of work. It will take months, if not years, to rebuild what we have here. But maybe that's necessary. Maybe I've been so focused on surviving that I've forgotten we're supposed to be fighting the lies."

She reached into her bag, pulling out a small data drive. "This is a backup of the archives. It contains every piece of evidence we've compiled over the past two years. If this all goes south and we're compromised, do your best to get this out and pass it on to another Resistance cell."

Jonnie took the drive. Between the original archives now saved on Brian's computer and this backup, they had a chance of passing the proof on to other members of the Resistance, even if the broadcast failed. It was a good idea, even if he didn't want to contemplate the possibility of failure. He dipped his head in Suzanne's direction, acknowledging the immense responsibility she had given him.

Mae chose that moment to join them, perhaps sensing the solemnity of the moment. She looked so vulnerable in her oversized pyjamas, but she walked over to the adults with a self-assurance few children her age possessed. "The Oracle says the Ghost walks into fire. Some ghosts burn. Some ghosts become smoke."

"That's not comforting, sweetheart," Sarah murmured.

Mae studied the adults around the table. "The broadcast happens and the truth reaches millions. Then everyone scatters. That's how seeds work, they scatter before they grow."

Jonnie wasn't sure anymore if he believed in Mae's Oracle, but her observations had been accurate enough times to warrant attention. "Does that mean we succeed?" He reached out for her hand.

Mae took his hand and tilted her head, considering. "The broadcast works. Millions of people will see the truth, so yes."

"But we don't bring down the Global State?" Jonnie asked.

Mae shook her head. "But cracks form. Small ones. They grow slowly. You won't see the results, but they'll exist."

"So, we die for cracks."

Mae tipped her head to the side again. "The Oracle didn't say you would die."

"But your picture—"

"What picture?" Suzanne interrupted. Sarah pulled Mae's earlier drawing out of her pocket and showed it to the team.

"The Oracle said some *might* die." Mae gave a shrug of her shoulders. "Not *will* die."

"That's reassuring," Robyn muttered under her breath.

"You risk dying for truth," Mae said to Robyn, before turning her attention to Sarah. "You have to choose soon Mummy. The Oracle shows two paths. Both hurt, but only one lets me remember who you were."

Sarah wrapped her arms around her daughter. "I'm coming back to you, sweetheart."

"Maybe." Mae's tone was matter of fact. "Either way, I'll remember. The Oracle promised."

Sarah frowned. Jonnie didn't blame her—that last bit of the Oracle's prophecy didn't seem to make any sense. But then again, a lot of what the Oracle said didn't make much sense at the time. Hindsight was always twenty-twenty.

Jonnie walked to the window. The boards covering the glass hid much of the view, but if you peered between the slats, you could see the city of London stretched out against the skyline. He imagined the millions of people moving through their choreographed, compliant little lives, unaware that their screens would soon show truth instead of lies. Would it matter? Would five minutes and forty seconds of evidence override two years of conditioning? Would people believe their proof, or dismiss it as a sophisticated hoax? He didn't know.

At 10.00, they began final equipment checks.

At 11.30, Fernsby distributed their tactical gear.

At 12.00, Suzanne pulled Jonnie aside and handed him a rumpled piece of paper covered in hand-drawn lines. "What is this? It almost looks like an old A to Z map," Jonnie asked.

"It's a map of the tunnels under the city. *All* the tunnels under the city. Every known Resistance safehouse, supply depot and dead drop is marked on here."

"Where did you get this?"

"The Merchant. I don't need to tell you that this absolutely cannot fall into the Global State's hands." Suzanne waited until Jonnie had given her his assurances before continuing. "Use this to escape and stay hidden. Get the drive to another Resistance cell."

"I will."

"I also don't need to tell you what will happen to you if you get caught?" She didn't. Death would be the kinder option compared to what they would do to him in the Psycho-Eval chair. "So, my advice is, if you're cornered and there's no escape possible, end it yourself. But destroy this map first." Suzanne held his gaze while Jonnie swallowed and then nodded. Just once. He took the map from her, folded it, and put it in his inside jacket pocket. "Good. Now make it count. Millions are watching. Make your sacrifice mean something." Suzanne clapped him on the shoulder, then wheeled away.

At 12.30, Brian handed Jonnie a drive with the transmission package. "This is a backup. I'll be uploading from my side here, but just in case "

Jonnie tucked it into his inside jacket pocket. "Just in case."

At 12.45, they gathered near the door. The final checks had been completed. Equipment had been distributed. They were as prepared as they could be.

Sarah kissed Mae goodbye and hugged her fiercely. Then she handed her daughter to Ahmed. "Keep her safe."

"I will, I promise."

Mae waved shyly at Jonnie. "The Oracle says the hand moves now. The Ghost cannot run. But perhaps the Ghost doesn't need to." She reached up and took Ahmed's hand.

Jonnie exchanged confused looks with Sarah. "What does that mean, Mae?" Jonnie asked.

The little girl shrugged. "You'll see."

At 13.00, Jonnie, Robyn, Fernsby and Sarah left together.

They walked out of the safe house in the old, condemned office building in Hackney into afternoon light that felt too ordinary for what they were about to attempt. Sarah split off to the right on her own, walking to a secondary safe house where her laptop was already set up, ready to use her previous clearance level status and help the broadcast go live. The other three split off to the left, heading

towards the abandoned Alexandra Palace station and the hidden entrance that would get them inside the broadcast relay station.

Behind them, Mae watched from the window, her small hand pressed against the glass. "Some come back," she whispered to Ahmed.

But who, Ahmed wondered. The answer would come soon.

Chapter 19

Inside the Tunnels

The Alexandra Palace station looked worse in the afternoon sunlight than it had at dawn. Graffiti criss-crossed walls like archaeological strata, each generation having left its mark. Weeds had pushed through cracked platforms with the patient violence of nature reclaiming its territory.

Jonnie led the three of them through the main entrance. Behind him came Robyn, moving with a predator's efficiency, her knife accessible but not visible. Fernsby brought up the rear, his scanner held low, monitoring for surveillance.

"Clear," Fernsby murmured, consulting his display. "No active surveillance within detection range. Either we're genuinely off-grid, or they're watching through systems my equipment can't detect."

"There's a thought," Robyn muttered.

Fernsby gestured towards the northern platform. "This way."

They found the service passage entrance, exactly as the Oracle's vision had promised. They counted steps together—seventeen brought them to the branch in the tunnel. They turned left and followed the copper telegraph cables. When they reached the pale limestone marker, they found the bricks Jonnie had loosened the day earlier remained undisturbed, still maintaining the illusion of sealed infrastructure.

"Right then." Robyn positioned herself at the entrance while Jonnie and Fernsby worked the bricks free. "Once we go down there, we're committed, right? No retreat if things go wrong."

"Things always go wrong," Jonnie warned, removing the final brick. Darkness yawned beyond, smelling of earth and century-old copper. "So, we adapt fast and

survive them." He stared into the opening. The Victorian service passage descended steeply into blackness so complete that his eyes couldn't adjust. Once they entered, the surveillance state's digital eyes would be blind. But blind also meant isolated—no GPS and no rapid evacuation if pursuit came.

He switched his torch on. The LED beam revealed brick walls slick with moisture and old telegraph cables running along the ceiling like frozen snakes. The tunnel was narrower than the schematics had suggested—perhaps four feet wide, maybe six feet tall. They moved in single file, hunched, unable to see more than ten feet ahead. Jonnie led the way with Fernsby bringing up the rear.

Jonnie's torch became his entire universe. In the claustrophobic tunnel, every sound was amplified. He could hear the harsh breathing of his comrades, the scraping of their boots over the uneven brick floor, and water dripping down the tunnel's walls. The air grew colder the farther they descended, carrying the stench of decay. Something had died down here—rats probably. After what felt like forever, the slope levelled.

They had reached another junction. Jonnie pulled Mae's map out and studied it by torchlight. The child's charcoal lines had marked the junction with surprising precision—not just the location, but the way the stonework shifted from red brick to white limestone. "North passage, then left at the marker."

"How did she know this?" Fernsby breathed, examining the junction. "These details are not in any database. The only way to have this information is to physically survey the space, and Mae's never been here."

"The Oracle provides," Jonnie said, although he still didn't understand how.

"The Oracle's giving us information that shouldn't be accessible through normal channels. That should concern us."

"It does. But we're past the point where concern changes our behaviour." Jonnie found the access point Mae had indicated—a section of newer wall where modern construction was connected to the old. Behind it, if the Oracle's vision was accurate, lay the relay station's substructure.

They worked quietly, removing bricks that had been mortared in place years earlier during the station's construction. The work was delicate, methodical and agonisingly slow. Every sound echoed. Every scrape of metal against stone felt

amplified to alarm-triggering volume. They finally broke through. Behind the wall, the darkness smelled different— cleaner, climate-controlled, modern.

"We're in," Jonnie whispered into his comms unit. "Moving to the control room."

Sarah's voice crackled back, transmitted through equipment jury-rigged from salvaged parts: "Copy that. Standing by. I'll disable security on your mark."

"Standing by," Jonnie confirmed.

They squeezed through the gap they'd created, emerging into a space that didn't exist on any blueprint. They stood in a void left when the relay station's builders chose to cap the Victorian tunnel rather than fill it.

Fernsby's scanner showed them in three-dimensional space now, no longer relying on Mae's prophetic mapping. "The control room is directly above us. There's an access ladder forty feet ahead. We need to climb approximately fourteen feet. At the top there's a door. Looks like an electronic lock with biometric verification."

"Which is where Sarah's credentials come in," Robyn said. "Assuming they work."

"They'll work," Jonnie said with more confidence than he felt.

Jonnie reached the ladder first. Rusted metal rungs disappeared into the darkness, climbing towards the relay station's operational heart. He began climbing, his pack making ascent awkward. The ladder shuddered under each step, metal groaning ominously.

I'm used to these hazards. Don't think about falling. Just climb.

About eight feet up, his right hand closed around a rung that crumbled under the pressure, rust flaking away and falling into his eyes. "Shit!" He shook his head and blinked rapidly, trying to clear his watering eyes.

"Jonnie?" Robyn's voice was sharp with concern.

"I'm fine. Got some rust in my eyes. Watch out for the rung up here—it's broken."

A few rungs further up, his left foot went right through a rung just as he shifted his weight onto it. His body dropped before his arms caught his weight. He hung there for a moment, adrenaline coursing as rust flakes rained down onto Robyn's head.

"You okay up there?"

"Yeah. Yeah. That was a bit too close for comfort. But yeah. Another rung broken here."

"Figured that out."

He continued even more carefully, testing each rung before committing his weight. Eleven feet up. Twelve. Thirteen.

At fourteen feet, his head struck the steel door. It was exactly as Fernsby had described: military-grade security designed to prevent exactly what they were attempting. "Sarah," Jonnie spoke into his comms, "we're at the control room access. I need those override credentials now, please."

"Copy. Accessing now." Her voice sounded strained. "Give me thirty seconds."

Those thirty seconds stretched like elastic. Jonnie pressed his ear against the door, listening for movement beyond. Nothing. Just the mechanical hum of a facility operating on automation.

Robyn and Fernsby had climbed up behind him, the three of them compressed on a landing designed for one. If the door didn't open, they'd have to climb back down, abort the mission and return to the safehouse having achieved nothing except confirmation that Sarah's credentials were dead.

"Credentials accepted," Sarah's voice crackled. "Security disabling. You should have access in five, four, three, two—"

The lock disengaged with a soft click. Green light where red had been.

"One. You're clear. The cameras are offline, alarms disabled, biometric verification bypassed. But Jonnie, I'm seeing unusual activity in the system."

"Define unusual."

"Some background processes are running that shouldn't be during normal operations. I can't be more specific than that—the code's encrypted beyond my level. But what worries me is that, whatever they are, they're active, resource-intensive and they seem to have started exactly when I accessed the security system." Her voice was tight, making her sound even more stressed. "It's possible they've upgraded security since my credentials were issued. Maybe my access triggered some kind of monitoring protocol."

"Can you disable it?"

"I don't think so. Definitely not without revealing my access point. If I try, they'll trace my location within minutes."

Jonnie chewed his lip. Should they abort? He checked the time: 14.45. If they retreated now, they'd never get another chance. Time to take a gamble.

"We proceed. Robyn, Fernsby weapons ready. If this is a trap, we fight our way out."

"We can try," Robyn muttered, but her knife was already in hand.

Jonnie pushed the door open, revealing the relay station's control room. It was smaller than he had expected—perhaps ten feet square, dominated by server racks and monitoring equipment. The walls glowed with displays showing transmission data, signal strength and broadcast coverage maps. Through a reinforced window, London stretched yellow beneath dying sunlight.

No personnel. The facility was completely automated. That was a strategic choice on the Global State's part: human guards could be unpredictable, but AI always followed its programming. But what the system perceived as a strength was actually a weakness they could exploit.

"Ahmed, Brian," Jonnie spoke into comms. "We're in position. Confirm status?"

"We're all set up here. The analogue broadcaster is calibrated, and signal strength looks good. Archive files are loaded and ready to go. On your command, we can begin transmission." Brian's voice held grim satisfaction.

"Copy that." Jonnie approached the primary transmission terminal and began typing in the commands needed to override the broadcast relay. "Sarah, can you confirm the security is still disabled?"

"Confirmed. You're ghosts." She paused. "Jonnie, that unusual activity I mentioned? It's increasing. Something in the system seems to know you're there, even with the security disabled." She sounded odd. A couple of minutes ago, her voice had been tight and a little higher than normal, making her sound stressed out, but now it sounded strangely flat.

"AI adaptation?"

"Possibly." Silence. The constant background static that Jonnie hadn't even been aware of was gone.

"Sarah?"

Silence.

"Are you there?"

Nothing.

"We've lost comms with Sarah," Jonnie told Robyn and Fernsby. The two of them exchanged grim looks. "Brian? Ahmed? You still with us?"

"We're still here," Ahmed confirmed.

"We have to assume Sarah is compromised," Fernsby said. "But we've got a job to do, innit? We're too far along to quit now."

"Robyn, keep an eye out for signs of guards converging on our location," Jonnie instructed. Robyn positioned herself at the control room's single entrance, watching the corridor beyond through the gap. Fernsby monitored his scanner, tracking for electronic signatures that might indicate approaching threats. Both looked tense, like coiled springs waiting to release.

Jonnie's hands darted across the terminal, finalising commands. The relay station's systems were designed to receive data from the northern arrays and rebroadcast locally. By hijacking this node, they'd override whatever alien simulation the Global State had scheduled and replace it with truth. For five minutes and forty seconds, London would know. Would see the hoax. Would understand that years of control had been built on lies.

If it worked.

It was 14.59.

"Brian, Ahmed I'm ready to press enter and flip the override switch here. How about you?"

"Standing by here. 15.01, yes?" Ahmed asked.

"Yes. On my signal."

Jonnie checked the time again. Glanced at one of the monitors, which was showing a live 24-hour newsfeed. Watched the second hand creep closer to 15.00.

At exactly 15.00, the newsfeed interrupted their programming for an official Global State broadcast. Jonnie watched a smartly-dressed presenter mouth something into a microphone before switching to a "live" feed of a faked alien.

He watched the second hand on his watch. Not the GCI holographic projection of the alien on the screen. "Okay, here we go. Five Four Three Two One. Switch flipped."

"Beginning transmission," Brian confirmed.

For three seconds, nothing happened. It was long enough for Jonnie's heart to slam against his ribs. Then the screens around the control room flickered and the

first image from their transmission package appeared.

"Our transmission is live," Brian's triumphant voice crackled through the comms. "The signal is propagating through the London relay network—about an eighteen-mile radius centred on Muswell Hill. Estimated recipient devices: four point two million."

Four point two million.

The number was abstract until Jonnie looked through the control room window at the city stretched out below. Somewhere in that sprawl of buildings and surveillance infrastructure, four million screens were changing. Four million people were seeing something they weren't supposed to see.

LOCATION 1: CAMDEN TOWN – THE BELIEVER

A man stood in the queue outside the forced vaccination checkpoint, his phone in hand, half-watching the usual Global State broadcast about unity through compliance. The screen was showing something about the upcoming alien address—another inspirational message from humanity's supposed guardians.

Then the screen went white.

For three seconds, there was nothing. He frowned, tapping the screen, thinking it was a network glitch. Around him, others were doing the same—tapping, swiping, muttering in irritation.

When the broadcast resumed, it wasn't what he expected.

Technical schematics filled his screen, stamped with Ministry of Integration seals. They showed massive installations of transmission towers, satellite uplinks and industrial-scale projection equipment. He stared at his screen, thinking about rumours he had heard, but never dared think about.

Beside him, a woman gasped. "What is this?"

"I don't know," he replied, but he was already reading the text scrolling beneath the image:

Internal Memo, Ministry of Integration, 15 March 2023:

Project Blue Beam enters operational phase. Northern array technology on schedule. Initial broadcast tests successful. Recommendation: proceed with global implementation. Estimated compliance increase: 78%. Projected resistance reduction: 94%. The alien narrative tests positively across all demographic segments.

The woman's hand went to her mouth. "That's that's five years before the Contact Event."

The man felt cold spread through his chest. Five years before the aliens supposedly arrived, the Global State was running tests on alien narratives. Testing for compliance increase. Testing for resistance reduction.

The man's screen flickered and new images appeared. Procurement orders for CGI rendering systems, contracts with holographic technology firms and psychological impact assessments predicting public response to simulated alien contact flashed past in quick succession.

Around him, the queue had stopped moving. Everyone was staring at their phones, at the digital billboard overhead, or at the checkpoint's display screens. Every screen was showing the same content.

"This is fake," someone said, their voice shaking. "This has to be fake. It's Resistance propaganda." But the man read the documentation and checked the authentication codes, all of which were clearly visible in the file headers. He recognised legitimate Ministry formatting. The encryption signatures were legitimate. The document classification markers were accurate.

This wasn't propaganda. This was real.

The aliens had been a hoax. Their arrival—the existential threat that had justified the creation of the Global State, the implementation of Digital IDs and implanted hand chips, the sacrifice of so many freedoms in the name of safety and survival—had been nothing but a lie. They had realised that the only thing that would force people to give up their liberties to an authoritarian power would be terror, so they had manufactured a threat so terrifying that people thought they had no choice but to comply.

He felt something break inside him. He'd accepted the chip in his hand because aliens were coming. He'd given up his privacy because humanity needed unity. He'd watched his brother get Blacklisted for questioning mandates because dissent threatened species survival.

All of it was built on lies.

The woman beside him was crying silently, tears running down her face as she watched evidence scroll across her screen. Many in the queue were still insisting it was fake, but he could see horror dawning on the faces of others. And,

throughout the queue, people were quietly backing away, their faces fearful and confused.

The checkpoint guards were shouting, trying to restore order, but their voices sounded distant.

The man looked at his phone, at the proof glowing there, and understood that whatever happened next, nothing would ever be the same.

LOCATION 2: SHOREDITCH – THE SKEPTIC

A Detective Inspector sat in her patrol vehicle, finishing paperwork on a non-compliance arrest. The detainee had been caught in an unauthorised gathering of four people discussing travel permits. That was an automatic Blacklisting, financial suspension and forced Psycho-Eval scheduling.

Her dashboard screen flickered. She glanced up, expecting the usual Global State public service announcement. Instead, she saw architectural schematics. She leaned forward. These were Ministry of Integration documents with high-level classification markers. These definitely weren't supposed to be on a public broadcast. She had spent fifteen years in law enforcement, so she knew how to spot a sophisticated forgery. But this documentation was either the best forgery that ever existed, or it was the real deal.

The broadcast continued, showing classified internal Ministry memos discussing the deployment of simulated holographic aliens and achieving population compliance through engineered fear.

Her partner in the passenger seat swore. "Is this real?"

She didn't answer immediately. She was reading a memo from someone identified as the Senior Director of Planetary Integration:

The alien narrative provides optimal justification for expansion of surveillance infrastructure. Psychological assessments confirm sustained compliance requires an ongoing existential threat. Recommend maintaining a visible orbital presence for a minimum 20-year operational window.

She thought about all the suicides she'd investigated—citizens who'd killed themselves because they couldn't cope with the knowledge that humanity was being watched by a superior intelligence; elderly people who'd opted for chemical euthanasia rather than face an uncertain future under alien observation. She could

no longer pretend that those deaths were akin to tragic accidents—they were nothing less than murders enabled by the Global State.

"Ma'am?" Her partner's voice pulled her back. "What do we do?"

She looked at him. He was so young, so dedicated, so fully indoctrinated into the Global State's ideology. "I don't know," she said honestly.

Her radio crackled, "All units, code red alert. Unauthorised broadcast detected across primary relay network. Do not acknowledge content. All evidence deemed Resistance fabrication. Response teams deploying to transmission source. Civilian inquiries to be redirected to official debunking protocols."

She wasn't surprised. In typical fashion, the Global State was already deploying counter-narrative strategies to neutralise the exposure. It was nothing if not efficient.

But she had seen the documentation. She knew it wasn't a Resistance fabrication. The broadcast was real. Which meant everything else—every arrest she'd made for non-compliance, every Psycho-Eval she'd facilitated, every freedom she'd helped destroy—had been in service of a lie.

She sat in silence watching the evidence continue to scroll across her dashboard, and felt her world quietly unmake itself.

LOCATION 3: HACKNEY – THE FAMILY

A mother had been preparing dinner when her kitchen unit's display screen changed. She barely glanced at it. The Global State broadcasts were constant background noise and, as such, were easily ignored.

But her fourteen-year-old daughter was staring at the screen with an expression she hadn't seen before. "Mum," you need to see this."

The mother approached, drying her hands on a recycled kitchen towel. The screen showed technical documentation—the kind of dense, official material that usually indicated government infrastructure updates. She was about to scold her daughter for interrupting her cooking when something caught her eye. She started reading:

PROJECT BLUE BEAM

Psychological impact assessment indicates that simulated alien contact will produce optimal compliance conditions. Subjects exposed to existential threat

demonstrate 94% increase in acceptance of surveillance measures and 87% reduction in resistance behaviours.

The mother read the words twice, trying to make them mean something else. Anything else.

"They made it up!" The daughter's voice was raised and grew louder with every word. "The aliens. The whole contact event. They made it all up!"

The mother wanted to tell her daughter that what they were seeing was fake, that it was Resistance propaganda—the kind of dangerous misinformation the Global State had warned about. But it looked real. It felt real.

The daughter was crying now. "We gave them everything: dad's job, your travel permits, my school freedoms. Everything! All because we thought aliens were coming."

The mother thought about her husband. He'd undergone Psycho-Eval for questioning vaccine mandates. He'd come back different—compliant, but emotionally flat. The personality that had made him who he was, was gone. She'd accepted it because humanity needed unity, or so the Global State said.

The kitchen unit chimed, bringing her thoughts back to the present. The unit was reminding her of the family's carbon allocation. Dinner would have to be nutrient paste again; they'd exceeded their monthly meat allowance. Another restriction she'd accepted because resources needed to be carefully managed during humanity's uncertain future.

Except the future had never been uncertain.

The daughter looked at the mother with an expression that broke her heart. "What do we do?" the daughter asked.

The mother didn't have an answer. She wrapped her arms around her daughter and held her while the evidence continued scrolling across the screen, exposing lie after lie after lie.

LOCATION 4: THE SAFEHOUSE – TECHNICAL CONFIRMATION

"Four point six million devices now," Brian reported, watching metrics scroll across his laptop. "Signal strength holding steady. Relay station integration successful."

Ahmed leaned over his shoulder, eyes scanning the data. "And it looks like the coverage is expanding beyond our initial projection. The relay's amplification

systems are functioning even better than expected."

"How long until the Global State responds?"

"They're already responding." Ahmed pointed to a secondary monitor showing network traffic analysis. "Look, there's a massive spike in communications from central operations. They're deploying countermeasures."

"The upload is at sixty-two per cent," Brian announced. "We've delivered approximately three minutes of content. Two minutes and forty seconds remaining."

On his screen, he could see thumbnail views of what London was experiencing, including newsfeeds of how the Global State was scrambling to respond. Official channels were releasing messages about technical difficulties or Resistance propaganda, but social media channels were exploding with rumours and, as quickly as one was quashed by official channels, another would spring up. Meanwhile, dark web forums were abuzz with speculation.

"The northern array evidence just transmitted," Brian said. "That's the critical proof that the contact event infrastructure existed years before the supposed alien arrival."

"Jonnie," Ahmed spoke into comms, "we're at seventy per cent upload completion. Three minutes twelve seconds elapsed. The evidence is reaching people."

"Confirmed," Jonnie's voice came through the static. "London is seeing it."

The truth was reaching people. Not all of them would believe. Most would accept whatever counter-narrative the Global State deployed. But some would question. And that uncertainty, that crack in the fa3ade, was all they needed to spark a real resistance to the Global State.

"Any response teams?" Ahmed asked.

A pause. Then, "Sirens. Distant but approaching. We've got maybe three minutes before this location is overrun."

Ahmed looked at Brian and saw his own thought reflected: three minutes wasn't enough time to complete the transmission and evacuate safely.

LOCATION 5: CONTROL ROOM – THE WEIGHT OF IT

Jonnie stood before the relay station's displays, watching evidence that was being transmitted across millions of screens. On one monitor, he could see a live feed of Piccadilly Circus. The massive digital billboards that usually showed Global State messages were now broadcasting Project Blue Beam schematics. Another

monitor showed social credit scores across the coverage area. Metrics were going haywire as the AI grid struggled to process the unprecedented disruption. Millions of citizens were viewing censored content simultaneously, but the system couldn't Blacklist everyone.

"The transmission is seventy-eight per cent complete," Brian's voice came through the comms. "Approximately one minute and thirty seconds remaining."

Robyn was splitting her attention between guarding the tunnel entrance to the room and examining the displays. "Will they believe it?"

Jonnie didn't answer immediately. On a screen, he watched a family—mother, father and two children—standing frozen in the middle of Picadilly Circus, staring up at the digital billboards. The mother's hand was over her mouth. The father's face carried an expression that Jonnie recognised: the moment your world quietly unmakes itself. "I don't know," Jonnie said honestly. "We gave them the truth. What they do with it isn't something we can control."

He picked at a hangnail. Sarah's comms channel was still dead. He tried not to think about it—he still had a job to do here—but her silence couldn't mean anything good.

Fernsby's scanner emitted a sharp beep. "We've got incoming. Response teams on multiple vectors. ETA three minutes."

"Upload is ninety per cent complete," Brian reported. "Final evidence package transmitting now."

The last files contained the most damaging documentation: recordings of closed-door meetings where senior directors discussed maintaining the alien narrative and managing public perception of the existential threat. It was proof that the deception wasn't just historical, but ongoing.

Jonnie glanced over at Fernsby. He was watching his scanner and the progress of the response teams intently. They were cutting it very close.

"That's it, upload complete," Brian announced, his relief evident in his voice. "Five minutes forty seconds transmitted. Four point eight million devices reached. Now get the hell out of there."

On screen, the broadcast ended. The relay station's systems began defaulting back to routine operations, trying to resume normal function.

But normal was over.

"Copy that. Transmission complete," Jonnie said into his comms. "We're moving out."

Robyn was already moving towards the door, knife held steady. Fernsby stuffed his equipment into his backpack. Jonnie took one last look at the displays. Over four million people had just seen the truth—a truth Billy had died for. Would they believe it? He hoped they would. He hoped at least some of them would wake up from the nightmare they'd been living in.

The sirens were closer now—no longer a distant warning, but an immediate threat.

Jonnie pulled himself away from the screens. "Let's move," he ordered, following Robyn towards the maintenance shaft exit.

Four point eight million people. Not enough to change everything. But enough to plant doubt. Hopefully.

Chapter 20

The All-Seeing Eye

The glass window exploded. Thousands of shards of safety glass hurtled through the air like lethal snow. Jonnie felt shrapnel whisper past his face as he threw himself sideways. He heard Robyn curse as something caught her shoulder.

Through the destroyed window came the drones.

Sleek black machines the size of large dogs glided with predatory intelligence, mounted weapons visible on their undersides. They hovered in the centre of the control room and painted red targets over Jonnie, Robyn and Fernsby's chests.

"Down!" Fernsby shouted, diving behind a server rack.

The drones opened fire.

Jonnie was expecting bullets. Bullets would have been better. The high-frequency sonic weapons made Jonnie's skull vibrate, his vision blur and his equilibrium vanish. He scrambled behind the transmission terminal, feeling the broadcaster's vacuum tubes dig into his back.

"We can't hold!" He saw Robyn's lips move, rather than actually hearing her say the words. Her nose was bleeding. He felt moisture on his upper lip and realised his was too.

Fernsby peered out from behind a server rack. He'd drawn his gun. His hands shook as he aimed at the nearest drone. Jonnie waved to get his attention. "No! Don't!" He shook his head, trying to clear the ringing in his ears. "The bullets might ricochet." He tried to mime what he was saying. Fernsby seemed to understand, because he lowered his gun. He held his hands out at his sides, elbows tucked in, palms up in the universal "so what now" sign.

The drones were adjusting their position to flank them and cut off retreat to the access ladder. More were arriving through the shattered window. The AI had identified the threat and was deploying an overwhelming force. The corridor outside the control room was filling with the sound of boots moving with military precision. On the plus side, it meant that Jonnie's hearing was returning. On the minus side, it meant that the rapid response teams had arrived and were staging for breach and extraction.

"Jonnie Villin. Robyn Chester. Desmond Fernsby." The voice came in through the shattered window, amplified by a loudspeaker. "You are surrounded. Surrender immediately and submit to evaluation. Compliance will be noted favourably during neural restructuring."

"Favourably." Robyn spat blood. "That's comforting."

The voice continued, "You have committed acts of terrorism against the Global State. You have propagated falsehoods designed to undermine societal cohesion. These are capital offences. However, the Global State recognises that dissent is a treatable condition. Surrender now and treatment can begin."

Jonnie's hand found his inside jacket pocket and felt the paper folded there. It was their only chance. Careful to keep it out of view of the drones, he withdrew the Merchant's map and unfolded it with shaking hands. He traced the markings with his finger. "There's another way out," Jonnie said quietly, his voice hoarse from the sonic damage. "It should be accessible through the equipment bay adjacent to this room."

"Should be?" Fernsby whispered back.

"Better than definitely dead or captured," Robyn said.

"This way, come on!" Jonnie lurched towards a door marked "Authorised Personnel Only", feeling his balance slowly returning as the distance from the drones increased. Robyn and Fernsby followed, moving like drunkards, their coordination destroyed by the sonic assault.

Behind them, the control room door exploded inward. The rapid response team would be entering now, weapons ready, moving with choreographed efficiency.

The equipment bay was exactly as marked on the Merchant's map: more rows of server equipment, cooling systems and backup power cells. And at the rear, behind a wall of old telecommunications gear, there was an access hatch.

"Maintenance sublevel," Jonnie confirmed, pulling at the door. It resisted, rusted shut from years of disuse. He put his back into it as Robyn added her weight beside him. Behind him, he heard Fernsby laying down covering fire to slow pursuit.

The hatch screamed open on protesting hinges to reveal a service ladder descending into darkness.

"Go!" Fernsby ordered, firing twice more. Flashes illuminated the equipment bay and showed figures in tactical gear breaching the doorway. "Down the ladder! I'll buy time!" A flicker of regret crossed his eyes, quickly replaced by steely resolve.

"We don't leave people behind. Come on," Robyn snarled, already climbing down the ladder.

"You do when there's no choice!" Fernsby fired his last round and ejected the magazine. "Someone has to collapse the hatch behind you, or they'll just follow. I'm the expendable one. Go!"

Jonnie wanted to argue, wanted to drag Fernsby down the ladder by force if necessary. But he knew he was right: the Resistance couldn't afford to lose them all.

Fernsby's jaw tightened, fingers white on the gun grip. In that split second, Jonnie saw the terror in his eyes harden into something sharper—a chosen end rather than a fate imposed. "Tell Suzanne it was worth it," Fernsby said and smiled. It was the first genuine smile Jonnie had ever seen from the defector. "Atonement is everything. I'm paying mine, right?" Fernsby charged the response team, using his empty weapon as a club, buying them seconds that cost him everything.

Jonnie and Robyn descended into darkness while the sounds of brutal hand-to-hand fighting echoed above them. They cut off abruptly. Then a voice, cold and professional, could be heard saying, "Subject Fernsby secured. Pursuing additional targets."

Jonnie had memorised the first part of the route. They could make it in seventeen minutes if they ran. He set off the minute his foot touched the ground. Robyn followed close behind him.

The maintenance sublevel was exactly what the name promised: narrow passages filled with pipes and cables and lit by emergency lighting that hadn't

been serviced in years. The Merchant's map showed a route threading east through the substructure, emerging two miles away in an unmonitored exclusion zone. Two miles through cramped tunnels while response teams pursued with thermal imaging and professional determination.

The sounds of pursuit followed them, although they fell further and further behind. But the response teams didn't need to rush; they just needed to be thorough.

The maintenance tunnels branched repeatedly. After the first couple of turns, Jonnie would pause at a junction to consult the Merchant's map, hoping the weeks-old intelligence was still accurate, that construction hadn't blocked passages, and that the safe zones marked in red ink still existed.

At the third junction, a drone found them. It was smaller than the combat models, designed for thermal imaging and underground reconnaissance. It rounded the corner ahead of them, its scanners painting them with invisible light. Before Jonnie could react, the drone crashed to the ground with Robyn's blade embedded in its sensor array. She calmly jogged over to the hunk of smashed plastic, yanked her knife free and stomped on the drone for good measure. Then she kicked the machine's remains into a side passage. "That buys us maybe ninety seconds before they realise it's offline."

They ran faster.

The tunnels grew older as they progressed, the Victorian brickwork replacing modern construction. This was the London beneath London, the infrastructure that had carried the city through the centuries before digital networks existed.

They found the first safe zone exactly where the Merchant's map had promised it would be. It was supposedly an old World War II bunker. Jonnie didn't care, as long as it was shielded, as the map indicated. The entrance was concealed behind rusted pipework, accessible only if you knew exactly where to look. The bunker itself was perhaps six feet square, with walls lined with lead shielding. Ancient emergency food supplies still lined the walls. Although they were in sealed containers, Jonnie thought it best to give them a miss.

"We hold here," Jonnie said, pulling the entrance shut. The darkness was absolute. "The lead shielding should block thermal imaging. They'll pass us, search

further east and eventually expand the perimeter. When they do, we'll hopefully have an opportunity to slip past them."

"Eventually. Hopefully. While we're trapped in a box with centuries-old, inedible food and no communication."

"You have a better plan?"

Silence. Which was answer enough.

They sat in the darkness, listening for the sounds of pursuit. Minutes passed like hours. Boots thudded outside, coming and going. Voices spoke—some close, some further away. Eventually, the only sounds seemed to come from a distance, and then, there were no sounds at all. Still, they waited in the darkness.

When Robyn spoke, it startled Jonnie. "Fernsby's captured. I think we can assume Sarah's been captured, too. We have no idea about the others, but we should probably assume they were also compromised. We have no idea how many got out. We're stuck in here with no way to contact any of the others. So, what's the plan?"

Jonnie felt it was safe to switch on his torch. He pulled out the Merchant's map and examined it in the light. The circle of light bobbed and weaved. He realised his hands were still shaking from the adrenaline, or maybe from exhaustion. "This shows other safe zones. There's a network of them spread across London. Places that are off the grid, forgotten, invisible to the surveillance state. Suzanne told me to use this to find another Resistance group if we were compromised. Maybe we can find another cell, and then maybe we can reach the others and regroup."

"Maybe is doing a lot of heavy lifting there."

"Yeah. But it's all we've got." He rubbed a hand over his face. Dried blood flaked off as his palm brushed his upper lip. "We'll give it two hours. Let them expand the search perimeter beyond this area. Then we slip past them into the next safe zone and try to establish contact with whoever's still free."

"And if nobody is? If we're all that's left?"

Jonnie sighed. "Then I guess we start again. Find other dissidents and defectors. Because that's what resistance means—starting again after everything falls apart. Never giving up."

Robyn laughed, dark and bitter. "Inspirational. You should write recruitment posters."

"Join the Resistance: lose everything you love, hide in bunkers, maybe die. Yeah, it's catchy."

Despite everything, they both smiled slightly in the darkness. Because humour, however grim, was its own form of resistance. Proof that the surveillance state couldn't kill everything human.

Two hours until they could move. An eternity measured in heartbeats and the weight of choices that had led them here.

Above, the all-seeing eye of the surveillance state watched relentlessly.

Below, the ghosts sat in fear and prepared to run again.

Chapter 21

The Price of Immunity

S*econdary Location, Hackney*

Suzanne

Suzanne knew something was wrong when Sarah arrived at the secondary location ten minutes early.

Mae looked up, terrified. She didn't run to greet her mother. But whatever doubts Suzanne had about Sarah's loyalty, she didn't think she'd deliberately endanger her own daughter.

"Inside," Suzanne ordered when she opened the door, "quickly. Robyn, Fernsby and Jonnie have you heard from them?"

"The comms went dead during the broadcast." Sarah's voice sounded strained. "I tried to maintain access, but the system locked me out. Counter-intrusion protocols, probably. I barely escaped myself. We need to assume the worst, that Jonnie, Fernsby and Robyn have been captured."

Mae was now clinging to her mother's leg. She hadn't uttered a word.

"Where's your gear?" Suzanne asked. Protocol dictated that evacuation required full equipment—communications, emergency supplies, weapons. Sarah's pack was too small to hold much of anything.

"I had to ditch it. It was slowing me down." Sarah moved further into the room, her eyes darting about constantly. "Ahmed and Brian?"

"Don't know. Haven't heard from them." Was Sarah fishing for information, or was that genuine concern? "We wait here for twenty minutes," Suzanne decided. "Long enough to confirm whether anyone else can reach this location. Then we scatter and regroup at the next location in forty-eight hours."

"Scatter? That's—"

"Protocol. In case of catastrophic compromise, we fragment to prevent total cell collapse. You should remember this from the briefing." Sarah had been at the briefing. Had nodded agreement to every protocol. But now it looked like she was hearing all of this for the first time. Suzanne's hand drifted towards the knife she kept inside her wheelchair.

That's when Mae spoke, her voice small and broken, "Mummy's phone is still on. The Oracle says the phone is lying even when it's off."

Sarah went still. "Mae, don't—"

"The Oracle says Mummy traded protection for betrayal." Mae's eyes were streaming tears, but her voice remained steady. "The Oracle says nobody's really wrong, but everyone gets hurt."

The words hung in the stale air like a death sentence.

Suzanne pulled out her knife, holding it ready but not threatening. "Sarah. Your pack. Open it. Now."

"Suzanne, I can explain—"

"Open it."

Sarah's hands shook as she unsealed the pack. One phone, deliberately powered down. And a second phone—smaller, professional-grade, the kind issued to intelligence assets. This one showed an active transmission indicator; it was broadcasting Sarah's location in real time.

"How long?" Suzanne's voice had gone low.

Sarah's eyes filled with tears. "Since the beginning. Since before you recruited me. They they approached me when Mae was four. Said her neural architecture was unusual. Said they wanted to study her, enhance her abilities, make her useful to the Global State."

"No." The word escaped Suzanne like a physical wound.

"I refused. What kind of mother would I be?" Sarah's voice cracked. "So, they forced it. Medical evaluation for all children showing cognitive anomalies. I had two choices: surrender Mae for their experiments, or work for them and protect Mae as best I could."

Mae had started crying silently, still clinging to her mother.

"Mae's Oracle," Suzanne demanded, her hands gripping the wheelchair's armrests until her knuckles went white. "The visions that guided us—every mission, every safe house, every narrow escape. Was that real or fabricated?"

Sarah's face twisted with something between pride and anguish. She looked down at Mae. "Both," Sarah said finally. "Mae's always had something. From the time she could speak, she saw things before they happened. Predicted outcomes with accuracy that terrified specialists when she was three. Her cognitive patterns don't match any baseline. There are things about her that neuroscience can't explain."

"Genuine psychic ability," Suzanne breathed.

"Telepathic insights, they called it in their reports. The Global State noticed immediately—they monitor all children for unusual brain development. Mae was flagged at two years old."

Suzanne's expression hardened. "They came for her."

"They came for both of us." Sarah's voice dropped to barely above a whisper. "Offered me a choice. Let them take Mae to a lab research facility to study her, dissect her abilities and potentially destroy her mind in the process. Or "

"Or work for them," Suzanne finished, her voice cold as iron.

Sarah nodded. "Become an intel asset. Join the Resistance as a deep cover operative. Feed them information about safe houses, operations, personnel. And in exchange, Mae stays with me. She keeps her freedom—or what passes for freedom in a surveillance state."

"But her visions," Suzanne said, her mind already working through the implications. "Every Oracle prediction that guided our operations. If they were genuine—"

"All genuine," Sarah interrupted. "That's the sick genius of it. The Global State didn't need to fake Mae's abilities. Her visions are real. She genuinely sees patterns, predicts outcomes, knows things she shouldn't be able to know. They called it the Oracle and just used her."

"Explain."

"By letting her guide you to exactly where they wanted you to go." Sarah's voice broke. "Mae would have a vision—genuine, unprompted, her own ability. She'd draw a map or describe a location. And I'd report it to my handlers. They'd

ensure that a safe house was safe, that an escape route remained unguarded. They were building your trust in the Oracle while simultaneously mapping your entire cell."

The room was silent except for the scratch of charcoal on paper—Mae, frantically drawing, still seeing whatever it was she saw.

"Every vision was real," Sarah said, voice breaking on the word "real". Her hands were shaking so badly she had to clasp them together. "But every vision served their purposes. Mae became their perfect intel asset. She was an untraceable, undetectable source that the Resistance trusted absolutely. Because she wasn't lying. She was just being what she is."

Suzanne's wheelchair jerked forward, sudden and violent. "Don't you *dare* talk about her like she's just some some weapon you helped them forge!"

"I didn't have a choice!" Sarah's composure shattered. Tears were streaming down her face now, unchecked and ugly. "They were going to *take* her, Suzanne! Register her, chip her, lock her in some lab and study her like a specimen until they'd drained every useful vision out of her mind!"

"So, you gave her to them anyway!" Suzanne's voice was raw, decades of control finally breaking. "You just dressed it up as protection!"

"I kept her *with me*!" Sarah was shouting now. "I kept her out of their labs, out of their evaluation centres, out of their *hands*! She's been free, she's been loved, she's been—"

"She's been *used*!" Suzanne slammed her palm against the wheelchair's armrest. The sound cracked through the room like a gunshot. "By them. By you. By all of us who trusted the Oracle because a child we loved told us to."

Sarah made a sound halfway between a sob and a scream, hands going to her head as if she could physically hold herself together. "I *know*! God, I know, I know. I've known for two years, and it's been killing me."

"Good," Suzanne said, voice dropping to something cold and lethal. "Good. Because you destroyed us. You destroyed people who trusted you, who let you into their homes, who—" Her voice caught. "Who thought you were family."

The word landed like a blade. Sarah crumpled. She folded in on herself, arms wrapped around her middle like she'd been punched in the gut. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm so sorry, I didn't know what else to do."

"You could've *told* me!" Suzanne's shout echoed off the walls. "You could've warned us, let us decide, given us a *choice* instead of making us all complicit in our own surveillance!"

"They would've taken her the second I told you! The second anyone knew, they'd have found a way to use her, break her—"

"So, you let them use her anyway. Just with your permission."

The accusation hung in the air, brutal and undeniable.

Sarah was crying openly now, face buried in her hands, shoulders shaking. "She's my daughter. She's my *baby*. What would you have done?"

"Not *that*." Suzanne's eyes were wet, but her voice stayed hard. "I would've found another way. I would've trusted the people I'd spent years building a network with. I wouldn't have turned my child into into "

"Into what I am," Sarah finished, voice hollow. "A traitor. A mother who sold out everyone she knew to keep her daughter safe, close."

The silence was suffocating.

A vein pulsed in Suzanne's temple. "A child who sees the future," she said finally, voice barely controlled. "Used as bait."

"Used as truth," Sarah corrected, wiping her face with shaking hands. "That's what made it so effective. You can detect a lie, question an informant, suspect a compromised source. But how do you question a seven-year-old girl with genuine psychic abilities who's never told you anything false?" Her voice was empty now. Defeated. Like she'd finally stopped fighting and accepted what she was.

"Every prediction Mae made came true because the Global State arranged for them to come true. They'd feed me intelligence—raid timings, guard rotations, surveillance blind spots—and I'd I'd tell her bedtime stories. Innocent stories about bad men and safe places and warnings that nice people needed to hear. And Mae would dream them. Really dream them. See them in her visions. Because that's what she does—she sees patterns, possibilities, futures. And I was feeding her the exact patterns they wanted her to see."

"Christ." Suzanne's voice was hollow. "You turned her gift into a transmission device."

"I kept her *alive*!" Sarah's anger flared again. "They could've locked her in a cell, could've drugged her, could've—" She stopped, breathing hard. "This way, she

had me. She had sunlight—filtered, but real. She had stories and drawings. Family and—"

"She had a mother who lied to her every single day."

Sarah flinched. She wrapped her arms tighter around herself. "Yes," she whispered. "She did."

Suzanne's mind was cataloguing every operation, every decision made based on the Oracle's guidance. "How many people, Sarah? How many operations did Mae's visions guide? How many times did we make decisions based on information you fed her in bedtime stories?"

"All of them." Sarah's voice was barely audible. "Every Oracle message for two years. All of them came through Mae. All of them came from the Global State intelligence I was feeding her, consciously or not."

The room was silent except for Sarah's ragged breathing and the distant hum of drones outside.

"And Jonnie." Suzanne's voice was flat now. Empty. "He cares about you. About Mae. You saw that. You used it."

Sarah's face crumpled again. "I didn't mean to. He wasn't supposed to "

"You slept next to him. Held his hand. Let him promise to protect your daughter if you died, knowing the whole time that you were the one marking him for capture."

"*I didn't want to*!" The scream tore out of Sarah, raw and animal. "I didn't want *any* of this! I wanted to take Mae and run; disappear, never look back! But they had her face, her biometrics, her psychic signature documented! There was nowhere I could hide her where they wouldn't find us!" She was sobbing now, completely unravelled. "I made a deal. I kept her close, kept her free, and in exchange I I fed them information. Small things at first. Safe house locations after we'd already moved. Names of people who were already flagged. But then Mae's visions got stronger as she grew older, more specific, and they realised what they had—"

"A prophet they could script," Suzanne finished. "A child who could see the future because you were showing it to her."

"Yes." Sarah's voice was broken. "Yes. And I've hated myself every single day for years, but I'd do it again. I'd betray you a thousand times over if it meant Mae

stayed with me, stayed human, stayed my daughter instead of their lab experiment."

"Then you're not the person I thought you were," Suzanne said quietly. "The Sarah I knew would've found another way. Would've trusted us. Would've died before she turned her child into a weapon."

"The Sarah you knew didn't have a child." Sarah's voice was hollow. "You can't understand until you have someone you love more than truth, more than principle, more than your own life. Mae is *everything*. And I will burn the whole world down to keep her safe."

"You already have," Suzanne said. "You just burned it from the inside."

Mae looked up from her drawing. Her too-old eyes met Suzanne's across the room. "Mummy told you the truth," she said, her voice carrying that eerie calm that had always made Suzanne uneasy.

Sarah stared at her daughter, tears streaming down her face. "How long have you known, baby?"

"Always," Mae said, returning to her drawing with those small, precise movements. "My Oracle sees everything, Mummy. Even the things you tried to hide. And the love that made you weak."

Suzanne sat motionless in her wheelchair, processing the layers of deception and truth wound so tightly together they'd become indistinguishable. Mae was genuine. Sarah was compromised. The Oracle was real, but exploited.

Sarah's face crumpled with something that might have been relief. "For two years, I fed my handlers what I found. But there was always something else, something deeper I couldn't reach. Turns out it was protection."

"Mae's Oracle protected the real Resistance," Suzanne said, understanding dawning. "Used you to map the expendable cells while hiding the ones that mattered."

Mae nodded. "The Oracle sees where Mummy stops being scared and starts being brave."

Suzanne wanted to believe that. Wanted to think that at least some of Mae's gifts were genuine, that Sarah hadn't been feeding them complete fabrications. But trust, once broken, couldn't be repaired. She lowered her voice. "You've been using

a child as an intel asset. Letting her carry operational burdens that break trained adults. What did you think would happen to her mind?"

"I protected her—"

"You exploited her!" Suzanne's voice broke with fury and grief. "Allowed her to believe she was helping us while you reported our every move. Made her complicit in betrayals she can't even understand. That child's Oracle—her so-called gift—you've turned it into a surveillance tool by association. Even if her abilities are real, you've contaminated them with your deception."

Sarah pulled Mae closer, protective instinct overriding everything else. "I did what I had to do."

"So did Jonnie. So did Fernsby. So did everyone you betrayed." Suzanne's knife lowered slightly. Not forgiveness—exhaustion. "How long until they get here? You're broadcasting our location now, so when do they arrive?"

"Ten minutes, maybe less. I was supposed to lead you somewhere more contained, but Mae had made the drop harder than planned."

"Mae saved me," Suzanne corrected. "Despite you." She wheeled towards the secondary exit, the one they'd scouted precisely for situations like this. "You've killed this Resistance cell, you know that, right? Whatever we built, it's done. Because nobody will trust any intelligence we've gathered, any operation we've planned. Everything is contaminated by your betrayal."

"I didn't have a choice!"

"Everyone has choices. You chose your daughter over collective resistance. I'm not saying I wouldn't have done the same." Suzanne shrugged. "I don't know. But own what you did. Don't pretend it was a noble sacrifice when it was just self-interest wrapped in maternal instinct."

Sarah's face crumpled. "Where will you go?"

"Somewhere you can't report. Somewhere Mae's Oracle can't guide us. Somewhere so far off the grid that even the Global State's surveillance can't penetrate." Suzanne paused at the exit and turned her wheelchair to face her. "For what it's worth, I hope they honour their deal. I hope Mae stays safe, stays herself. Because if they betray you after all this if they take her anyway, you'll have destroyed us and yourself for nothing."

Mae finally spoke, her voice small and broken, "The Oracle says everyone gets captured except the four. Says the Ghost and the Blade are hidden where the system can't see. Says Mummy and I are going somewhere that has no Oracle, only silence."

"See, that's Mae saying that, not intel," Sarah assured her.

"Psycho-Eval chair," Suzanne realised with horror. "They're going to Psycho-Eval you both. Sarah, run! Take Mae and run right now—"

The door exploded inward.

Combat drones, followed by tactical teams in full gear, moved with choreographed efficiency. Suzanne managed to turn her wheelchair away before sonic taser weapons dropped her out of it, consciousness fleeing in a wave of disorienting pain. Through the darkness, she heard Mae crying. Heard Sarah trying to explain to her daughter why the men in masks were acceptable, why they were friends, why everything would be fine.

"They lied to you, Mummy. The Oracle tried to warn you. They lied."

Then nothing.

Chapter 22

Beneath the Surface

The sky had turned grey with smoke.

Jonnie couldn't see much through the grid in the cramped ventilation shaft, but he could see enough. People on the streets outside were voicing their anger towards the Global State propaganda. He hadn't seen crowds like these since the Consolidation. Some citizens were protesting peacefully, standing in designated protest zones and holding signs that read things like "Show us the arrays" and "What else are you hiding?". But others had moved way beyond peaceful protest.

"They're burning surveillance towers," Robyn reported from a different vent. "It looks like Hackney and Tottenham. And people are pulling down facial recognition cameras. There are combat drones deploying, but the crowds aren't scattering—they're standing their ground."

"How many people can you see?"

"Thousands. Maybe tens of thousands? I can't get an accurate count, but it's " She turned to look at Jonnie, something like awe in her expression. "It's working. The broadcast worked. People are waking up."

But with their awakening came consequences.

BY ORDER OF THE GLOBAL STATE, MARTIAL LAW IS HEREBY DECLARED. ALL CITIZENS MUST RETURN TO REGISTERED RESIDENCES IMMEDIATELY. CURFEW BEGINS AT 18.00 AND REMAINS IN EFFECT UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE. GATHERINGS OF MORE THAN THREE PEOPLE ARE PROHIBITED. VIOLATIONS WILL BE MET WITH IMMEDIATE DETENTION AND FORCED EVALUATION. THE SAFETY OF THE GLOBAL STATE REQUIRES YOUR COMPLIANCE.

The announcement was broadcast on every speaker and every screen in the vicinity. Jonnie imagined it was being broadcast across every device in London.

"Oh, my God! They're bringing in the United Nations' military," Robyn said, tracking movement through the binoculars. "Actual soldiers in full combat gear. Armoured vehicles are rolling through the streets. This isn't containment; it's an occupation."

"The Global State are terrified. The broadcast proved they've been lying for years. If citizens question that lie, they might question everything else. Digital ID requirements, facial recognition, full surveillance networks, Psycho-Eval protocols. The whole infrastructure of mass control will start to collapse."

"Don't they realise that meeting questions with violence is just going to make things worse?"

"Violence is all they have left."

The tablet buzzed. Jonnie jumped down from his spy perch to check it out. It was an encrypted message from Ahmed:

Brian and I are safe. Sarah, Mae and Suzanne have been captured.

"Ahmed and Brian are alive and safe," Jonnie informed Robyn with a solemn look.

"Finally! Some good news. What else did he say? She looked into his eyes and sensed bad news."

"Suzanne, Mae and Sarah have been captured." Jonnie held his breath, went back to reading:

Sarah is a traitor.

Jonnie read that line again, as if the words might change into something less damning.

Sarah is a traitor.

For a second, the room seemed to tilt. The drone hum outside, the faint crackle of static from the tablet, even Robyn’s breathing all dropped away. Jonnie stared at the screen until the letters blurred. He had suspected something, yes — those signals, and the way Sarah had checked her pocket with a nervous twitch — but suspicion was one thing. Proof was another. This was a knife sliding in clean between the ribs.

He felt it in stages. First disbelief. Then a hot, sick surge of anger that made his throat tighten. Then, worse than both, the memory of her hands in his and when she dressed his wound, careful and steady. The chips she'd made. The way she'd looked at Mae. The ease in her voice when she'd told him to rest, as if she were trying to protect him. Or make him lower his guard. He couldn't tell anymore, and that uncertainty made him want to tear the tablet in half.

"No," he said, though it was barely a sound.

Robyn saw his face change and stepped closer. "What?"

Jonnie swallowed. His mouth had gone dry. "Sarah."

Robyn frowned, impatient at first, then wary when he didn't answer immediately. He turned the tablet toward her with a hand that wasn't quite steady. She read the line once, then again. Her expression didn't change for a beat, as if her brain had refused to process it. Then her eyes lifted sharply to his.

"She's what?"

Jonnie let out a brittle, humourless laugh that held no humour at all. "That's what it says."

Robyn snatched the tablet from him and scanned the rest of the message. Her jaw set hard. "No. That can't be right."

"It's Ahmed," Jonnie said, but the words sounded weak even to him. "He wouldn't send that unless, he was sure."

Robyn shook her head once, sharply. "You don't know that. We've just seen what happens when people are under pressure. She's been taken; they could've forced anything out of her. Or used her name on TV to pull us off balance."

Jonnie wanted to agree. He wanted that more than anything. But the suspicion he'd buried in his gut rose up now, ugly and undeniable. The half-glimpsed phone icon. The way she'd angled the screen away. The tiny hesitation before she'd answered questions that should have been easy. He remembered all of it at once, and with each memory his stomach sank lower.

"She knew too much," he said quietly. "Little things. Enough to make sense now."

Robyn's eyes narrowed. "That isn't enough."

"No," Jonnie said. "It isn't. But it's enough to make me feel like a fool."

Robyn looked at him for a long moment, and for once her usual sharpness softened into something else — not kindness exactly, but recognition. She knew what it was to trust the wrong people. To realise too late that you'd handed someone your weak points and called it solidarity.

Then she glanced back at the tablet and her face changed again.

"Wait."

He waited, though it did nothing to steady him. His thoughts were colliding too fast — Sarah was a traitor. The safe houses, the captured network, the possibility that everything they'd been building had already been compromised from the inside. He hated how quickly his mind leapt to the worst conclusion, and hated more that the worst conclusion kept making sense.

Monitoring situation. Civil unrest increasing. Military response excessive. Opportunity emerging. Need to regroup. Coordinates attached. The Merchant has reached out. Wants meeting. Claims he can help rebuild. Your decision. A.

Coordinates followed. The location was deep in the bones of London's forgotten underground—in the city beneath the city.

"They want to meet. And they say they've heard from the Merchant; he's offered to help. We need help, Jonnie. We can't fight a surveillance state as individuals, or even small groups. We tried that and recruited a traitor, and it cost us Fernsby, Suzanne, Mae." Her voice caught on the child's name. "If we're going to have any chance, we need a network. Resources. We need other people."

"The Merchant has all three. And he can help us get our allies out." Jonnie replied with renewed enthusiasm.

"Maybe. But the Merchant's also a black market dealer whose primary motivation is profit. How do we know we can trust him? That he won't sell us out like Sarah did?"

"We don't. But like you said, we can't do this alone. And Ahmed's right, an opportunity's emerging. People are questioning, protesting, breaking free of the system's control—even if only temporarily. If we don't capitalise on that momentum, the Global State will crush it and implement controls so severe that any future resistance becomes impossible."

Robyn lowered the binoculars and turned to face him. "So, what's the plan?"

"First, we find the Merchant. We regroup, then we grow. We recruit and we organise. We build something that can't be decapitated by a single betrayal." He pulled out the Merchant's map, now worn from repeated folding. "These safe zones—they're gathering points, not just hiding places. They're the locations of communities that already exist off the grid. All the unregistered and Blacklisted—people who've been resisting just by surviving these past two years. It's for people like them that we do this. But it's clear we've got to do it better. We either build or we die. And I'm not ready to die yet. Are you?"

Robyn shook her head. "No. But what you're talking about is guerrilla warfare."

Jonnie spread the map flat between them. "I'm talking about using what we've learned. Sarah's betrayal taught us that centralised leadership is a vulnerability and that knowing too much makes you a target. So, we build something different. Cells that are compartmentalised, with each group knowing only what it needs to know. Information flows through secure channels. That way, there's no single point of failure."

Robyn cocked her head as she considered this. "We'd need training protocols. Encryption systems. Dead drop locations. And we'd need proper recruitment vetting that doesn't rely on personal trust or one person vouching for someone—that was our downfall with Sarah."

"All of which I think the Merchant can help us with. He's been running black market operations for years without getting caught, so he understands operational security better than we do."

"Or he's a Global State asset waiting to scoop up Resistance survivors."

"Yeah, okay—that's a possibility. But we won't know until we meet him and verify. We'll be careful. We'll test him, and if he betrays us, we'll make sure he can't take down the whole network." Jonnie traced routes on the map. "The underground tunnels—Victorian, war bunkers, decommissioned utilities—they form natural sections. Different cells operating in different sectors, communicating through methods the surveillance system can't monitor effectively."

The tablet buzzed again with another message from Ahmed:

Military crackdown intensifying. Estimates of 300+ arrests in past hour. Psycho-Eval facilities beyond capacity. Global State is implementing field evaluation protocols. Citizens being rehabilitated on-site. This is accelerating faster than

predicted. If we're going to act, needs to be now. The Merchant says he's got access to something that could change everything. Won't say what over unsecured channels. Meeting coordinates still active. Your call. A.

"We're out of time. The Global State's moving to crush this before it metastasises. If we don't act now, the window will close. Permanently."

Robyn checked her weapons—her trusty knife, improvised explosives and a gun she'd scavenged from somewhere. "Then we act. But Jonnie, if this goes wrong, if the Merchant's compromised or if we walk into another trap, we scatter again. No heroic last stands. No martyrdom. We survive to fight another day."

"Agreed."

They gathered their equipment, sealed the bunker behind them and descended deeper into London's forgotten infrastructure. The Merchant's map guided them through passages that hadn't seen human traffic in decades. They traversed tunnels connected to sewers, connected to bunkers, connected to spaces that existed in no official database. It was the underground beneath the Underground. They travelled for two hours, following coordinates that took them east and then north, spiralling down through infrastructure layers like geological strata. Each level was older than the last. Finally, they reached Ahmed’s rendezvous point.

It wasn't what Jonnie expected.

The chamber was vast: a Victorian water reservoir converted into something else during World War II, then abandoned when digital infrastructure made physical spaces obsolete. But it wasn't empty. Hundreds of people filled the space, their faces illuminated by salvaged lighting. They were gathered around tables made from industrial debris, working on communications gear, surveillance countermeasures and weapons both improvised and scavenged.

Ahmed and Brian were there, looking healthier than when Jonnie had last seen them. More than that, they looked purposeful. And at the centre of it all, coordinating with calm authority, was a figure that could only be the Merchant. "Welcome to the real Resistance," he said, approaching Jonnie and Robyn. "Took you long enough to find us."

Jonnie stared at the operation, his mind reeling. "How long has this been here?"

"Five years. Since before the Consolidation. Some of us saw what was coming and went underground before they could implement full surveillance." The

Merchant gestured to the gathered people. "Unregistered citizens. Blacklisted persons. People who chose invisibility over compliance. We've been here all along, building infrastructure and waiting for the moment when aboveground resistance became possible again."

"The broadcast has provided that moment," Ahmed added, joining them. "Almost five million people saw the truth. Even with the Global State's counterpropaganda and lockdowns, people can't unsee what they've seen. They know now. They're questioning. Some are resisting. We can work with that."

"How?" Robyn demanded. "The Global State's deploying military force. Field evaluations. This protest wave will be crushed within days."

"Which is why we don't rely on traditional protests, which you need permission from the state to organise. Protests have never worked. Even if they are genuine, they'll have been infiltrated by intel assets," the Merchant explained. "In any case, old-school protests like mass mobilisation, street action and public confrontation definitely won't work against modern surveillance. They have superior firepower and unlimited resources. And they have AI-powered surveillance on their side. They'll always win in any direct confrontation."

"So, what do you propose?" Robyn asked.

"Underground operations." He led them deeper into the chamber, pointing out infrastructure and resources Jonnie hadn't initially noticed, like their server farms built from salvaged equipment, communication arrays jury-rigged from pre-digital technology and weapons caches organised with military precision. "We don't fight where they're strong; we fight where they're vulnerable. Things like their infrastructure, supply chains, data centres and maintenance tunnels. We target the physical systems that a digital surveillance state depends on."

"Sabotage," Brian clarified. "The idea is to make the surveillance state so expensive to maintain that it collapses under its own weight."

"And the people on the streets getting arrested?" Robyn challenged. "The protesters facing field evaluations? We just abandon them?"

The Merchant sighed. "I understand your frustration. I wish we could save everyone, but we can't. It's just not possible. What we can do is learn from their sacrifices. Their uprising is forcing the Global State to reveal its true nature—that it maintains control through violence, not consent. We recruit from the people who

have witnessed that violence and are appalled by it and want to fight back. We organise them into cells that can operate without centralised leadership. We teach them tactics that surveillance and AI can't predict; tactics that are based on analogue methods and human unpredictability."

A woman approached their group. She was in her mid-thirties, with a scarred face and eyes that had seen too much. "You're Jonnie Villin, the whistleblower. The one who leaked the Project Blue Beam hoax."

"That's me."

"My sister saw your broadcast. She tried to tell her neighbours, but she got arrested. Her field evaluation is in progress as we speak." Her voice was steady, but her hands shook. "I want to know how I get her back. How I make them pay."

Before Jonnie could answer, others approached: a teenager whose parents had been disappeared; an elderly man whose grandson was scheduled for forced evaluation; a mother carrying a child who looked terrified. More stories. More losses. More reasons. The underground chamber was full of them all.

"This is your network," the Merchant said quietly. "People who've been waiting for someone to light the spark. You lit it. The broadcast proved resistance was possible. Now we build on that foundation."

"How many?" Jonnie asked, just as quietly. "How many people are down here?"

"In this chamber? Three hundred or so. In the broader Resistance network across London? Thousands. Maybe tens of thousands. It's hard to get an accurate count when everyone's off the grid by design." The Merchant's expression was serious. "But they need leadership. Organisation. Strategic direction. That's what you provide."

"I'm not a leader. I'm just a hacker who got lucky."

"You're the Ghost in the Machine," Ahmed corrected. "The person who proved the system could be beaten. That's worth more than any strategic or tactical expertise. It's symbolic power."

"Symbols of power get people killed."

"Living in the system does that too, eventually." The Merchant pulled out a tablet showing maps and diagrams. "Let me fill you in on my plan. We've identified sixteen critical infrastructure points, including power substations, data routing centres and surveillance hubs. Simultaneous strikes on all sixteen targets

would create a domino-like system failure that would cascade through their infrastructure, creating disruption that would take weeks to repair. During that chaos, we could broadcast again. Not just once, but repeatedly. We could show the people more evidence. We could make it impossible for the Global State to maintain a coherent narrative."

"You're talking about urban warfare," Robyn said.

"If you want to call it that. I call it survival warfare." He looked at each of them in turn. "Your cell was vulnerable because you tried to fight with traditional resistance methods, using a centralised command and sharing intelligence. You relied on each other. But your emotional connections became vulnerabilities. We've built something different: distributed, compartmentalised, resilient."

"And the people already captured?" Jonnie pressed. "Fernsby, Suzanne, Sarah, Mae. Are we supposed to just write them off?"

"We don't sacrifice the network for individuals. That's how the old resistance failed—prioritising individuals over the mission." The Merchant's voice softened slightly. "I lost people, too. Family. Friends. People I'd die for. He paused to reflect. "I had a daughter once. The Global State didn't just take her life; they performed a neural reset and replaced her with an algorithm. Now she walks the transit queues of Highbury with a dead-behind-the-eyes smile. She thanks the Global State for her correction while looking right through me as if I were a total stranger. I could die for her; sacrifice myself for her. But dying for her won't help. Surviving to continue fighting that helps."

Jonnie wanted to argue, wanted to insist they could save everyone, but he couldn't deny the truth of the Merchant's words.

"What do you need from us?" Robyn asked, pragmatic as always.

"Training. You've penetrated a military installation, hijacked a broadcast relay and survived pursuit by trained soldiers. Those are skills worth teaching. We've got recruits who need ops expertise." The Merchant gestured to the gathered people. "And we need your stories: how you succeeded; how you failed; what you learned. Knowledge is the only currency that matters here."

"I've been working with their technical teams," Ahmed said. "They've got the equipment and parts to replicate the analogue broadcaster. We could build dozens, maybe even hundreds, and distribute them across the city. Each one would be

capable of local broadcast independent of centralised control. Even if they shut down fifty, the others would keep transmitting."

"Like a hydra," Brian clarified. "Cut off one head, two grow back. An ancient concept with a modern application."

"How long until you're operational?" Jonnie asked the Merchant. "Until all sixteen targets can be hit simultaneously?"

"Three months, maybe four. We need to train personnel, stockpile resources and perfect coordination so we don't leave any digital trails. It's slower than aboveground resistance, but it's sustainable. And sustainability is what wins wars."

"Three months while people are being evaluated up there."

"Yes. That's the cost." The Merchant didn't look away. "Some battles you can't win. Some people you can't save. The question is whether you let that stop you from fighting the battles you can win and saving the people you can save."

Fine dirt sifted down from the roof of the cavern far overhead. Vibrations could be felt through the ground under their feet. Jonnie looked up in alarm, but the space they were in was heavily reinforced and deep underground and was in no danger of collapsing. He wondered what could be causing the tremors. Explosions, maybe, or heavy machinery. The military crackdown was continuing on the streets above.

Jonnie looked at Robyn, Ahmed and Brian. His remaining allies, the survivors. Each nodded back at him. "We're in," Jonnie told the Merchant. "We'll help build this network. We'll train recruits and share what we learned. But " He fixed the Merchant with a hard stare. "We're also going to plan rescue operations. Fernsby, Suzanne, Sarah and Mae are not disposable."

The Merchant stared at him for a full minute. "You're not going to budge on this, are you?"

"No. Those are my our terms. Take them or leave them."

"Then I guess we've got ourselves a deal, you stubborn bastard." The Merchant extended his hand. Jonnie clasped it and gave a firm shake. "Welcome to your new home." The Merchant clapped him on the shoulder, then left to talk with a group of new arrivals who looked shell-shocked.

Jonnie stared at the hundreds of faces surrounding him—the network he'd believed couldn't exist, the Resistance he'd thought was just scattered survivors.

He'd once believed in the Global State, with its promises of security through compliance. Then he'd believed in Suzanne's Resistance cell, with its Oracle. Both had been lies. Different lies, but lies, nonetheless. Nothing was simple. Nothing was pure.

"I don't trust this," Jonnie said quietly. "Any of this. Not the Merchant. Not his network. Not even myself."

"Good," Ahmed's voice was similarly quiet. "Trust is what nearly got us all captured. Paranoia is what keeps us free."

Jonnie had an epiphany then. Maybe survival didn't mean finding the right system to believe in. Maybe it meant questioning everything, even your own side. Maybe it meant building relationships on verified actions rather than assumed loyalty.

The only person he could truly trust was himself. And even that required constant examination.

Chapter 23

The Ghost Lives

Forty-eight hours had passed since the broadcast. Forty-eight hours of consequences rippling outward in ways that nobody had fully predicted.

The transmission had succeeded. Approximately five million people had watched it on screens across London. Another seven million had accessed it through social media and a thousand different websites before the Global State could shut them down and distribute its counterpropaganda.

Above their heads, London was burning. People were rioting and the Global State was responding with force. But for every person protesting against the Global State, there was at least one, or more, protesting in their favour. The Global State's propaganda machine was every bit as effective as their surveillance. More so, perhaps.

Jonnie, Ahmed, Brian and Robyn had been watching the news feeds when Ahmed received an update from a Resistance contact within the Highbury evaluation centre where their allies were being held.

"Fernsby went into Psycho-Eval six hours ago," Ahmed reported, his voice flat as he read from the report. "They've scheduled him for personality reconstruction, memory partitioning and neural compliance resetting. That usually takes about six weeks to complete, but an enhanced version can be done in three weeks. The Merchant's contact doesn't know if they've started or not, but it's best to assume they have."

"Anything on Suzanne?" Jonnie asked.

"Her evaluation is scheduled to begin tomorrow. There are no details on exactly what they'll do to her yet. It just says that they've got her in a diagnostic room.

But it does say that they want to understand how physical disability affects resistance psychology."

"That is not good," Robyn grimaced. "That means extra tests and likely a longer hold at the facility."

"Probably," Ahmed agreed.

"A diagnostic room is less secure than a normal cell. That could also mean she's cooperating, providing names and locations," Brian said quietly.

"I can't imagine Suzanne doing that," Jonnie protested. Brian shrugged.

"What about Sarah?" Robyn asked, glancing sideways at Jonnie.

"She's scheduled for evaluation tomorrow afternoon," Ahmed said. "She's down for advanced protocols. They want to do more to understand her psych profile—as someone who worked as an embedded asset who then developed genuine emotional attachments to her targets. I guess she has value to them as a research subject."

Jonnie couldn't suppress his wince. Sarah was going to be strapped to a table with electrodes attached to her skull. She was going to have her personality surgically disassembled piece by piece. They'd take her memories of loving Jonnie. They'd take her concerns about Mae's gifts and her safety. They'd take her capacity for guilt and remorse and everything that had made her human. All they'd leave was an empty, compliant shell.

"And nothing about Mae?" Robyn asked. Ahmed shook his head. The last they'd heard, Mae was being held in the same Highbury facility, but in the psychiatric wing. As a child, she wasn't technically under arrest, but she was being held under child welfare protection orders pending her mother's evaluation. Which meant they were probably still using Mae as leverage to keep Sarah compliant and a traitor to the Resistance.

Jonnie walked to the chamber's far wall, where the Merchant had spread the network maps. There were hundreds of marked locations and thousands of names. Years of patient underground infrastructure building. But all of it was now at risk because their cell had made noise and had forced the Global State to respond.

"The Resistance is already reorganising to meet the threat posed by the Global State's crackdown," the Merchant said, appearing at Jonnie's shoulder with the ease of someone accustomed to moving through shadows. "Fourteen of our thirty cell

locations are going dark and relocating to their secondary posts. Four locations have been proactively evacuated. We've had no arrests yet, but we can see that surveillance AI is running pattern analysis on our network traffic. They're looking for the nodes, trying to map our structure."

"How long until they find us here?"

"Oh, don't worry about that. Where we are is so old and deep that their databases don't have complete records. We've likely got weeks. But they're thorough, so eventually they'll correlate data patterns, cross-reference geological surveys and narrow the search space. But we'll be long gone before then."

Jonnie looked at the maps showing the vast network that had been operating beneath the Global State's attention. He'd known there were other cells besides theirs because Suzanne had mentioned being in contact with some of them. But he had never imagined this. He'd believed all the other cells were small and scattered, just like theirs. Mostly independent, like theirs.

"Why didn't you tell us this bigger network existed? We could have worked with you from the start instead of " He gestured vaguely at the wreckage of everything they'd built and lost.

"Because we needed you to do exactly what you did," the Merchant replied. "Your job was to discover the system's vulnerability. You had to attempt a broadcast, and you had to force the Global State to respond. Your cell was always meant to be the spark. Highly visible, but expendable. Your purpose was to draw the Global State's resources and attention towards your operation while the actual Resistance infrastructure remained hidden, especially from traitors."

Jonnie felt a little sick. He'd thought they'd been at the heart of the Resistance, but they'd been nothing more than a tool—okay, maybe a weapon—used by an invisible hand. They'd been pointed at the surveillance state and detonated. They'd been used and then discarded.

The Resistance strategy wasn't all that different to the Global State at times.

"You knew we'd be compromised," Jonnie said, anger making his voice crack. "Knew at least some of us would be captured."

"I suspected it was likely. Your cell was constructed to be discovered. That's how we design infiltration resistance. We use the visible cells as bait while

preserving our core network." The Merchant didn't even have the decency to look regretful.

"Did Suzanne know?"

"She knew what she needed to know."

"Sarah knew." Jonnie couldn't disguise the bitterness in his voice.

"She suspected because the Global State suspected. You *were* bait."

"You threw us away!" People working near them were looking up, curious as to why their new figurehead was raising his voice. Jonnie took a deep breath and fought his anger down. "It didn't have to go down the way it did. We could have pulled off the broadcast without you setting us up for betrayal."

"Perhaps. We could have outed Sarah and protected your cell, you're right. But Sarah's position with your cell presented an opportunity. Her internal conflict—her maternal instincts and the relationships she built with each of you warring with her programmed compliance—meant she'd be forced to go one of two ways: either she'd fully commit to the Resistance and become an asset, or she'd default to her programming and become leverage. Either way, we knew she'd be useful."

Jonnie was clenching his jaw so tight his teeth ached. The chessboard game of it was almost beautiful in its cruelty. Every person in Jonnie's cell had been evaluated, profiled and slotted into roles within a larger game that extended far beyond their individual decisions. "You're telling me my friends are being mindwiped because you used us as—" He broke off, unable to find words to express his rage and despair.

"I'm telling you, again, that sometimes being part of the Resistance requires accepting losses that seem unacceptable," the Merchant said, not unkindly.

"That's bullshit. That's " Jonnie wanted to hit something. Someone. Then the rage leaked out of him. "We're going to rescue them."

"So you said, but I'd like to know how you think you can do that. Highbury, where they're being held, is a military facility. The security is beyond comprehensive. Extracting prisoners would require resources we don't have, not to mention risk exposure that would damage the entire network." The Merchant's expression remained neutral, but Jonnie caught a tiny twitch in his left eyelid.

He narrowed his own eyes. "What aren't you telling me? Is there a way in?"

The Merchant stared at Jonnie for a long moment, saying nothing. Then he appeared to come to a decision. "I'm probably going to regret telling you this, because it's just going to get your hopes up and this is a long shot." Jonnie made a wind-on motion with his hand when the Merchant didn't automatically continue. The Merchant pursed his lips and then continued. "Sarah's evaluation is scheduled to begin tomorrow at 14.00. During the intake procedure, she'll need to provide her biometric credentials for confirmation. When she does, her neural interface will be temporarily connected to the network, which we can hack. Her evaluation also just happens to coincide with the shift change for the biometric security team. That gives us a brief window."

"To do what, exactly? Do you want to implant instructions straight into her brain? Override her compliance protocols? What?"

"I want to give her access to a dead drop communications channel. What she does with it is her choice."

"And if she reports it to her handlers?"

"Then we would have to relocate the entire network. The mission gets disrupted and our timeline gets extended by months. Some of our people may get captured, or even killed. It's a big risk, but a calculated one."

Jonnie's brows pulled together as he thought. That was a huge gamble to take on somebody who had already betrayed them. What was the Merchant thinking? That Sarah had seen the error of her ways? And he'd said they didn't have the resources to pull this off and "Hold on, you said this was a long shot. You didn't mean Sarah helping us, did you?"

"No, I mean contacting her in the first place. It has maybe a ten per cent chance of even working. If we do manage to get through, I'm actually a bit more confident that Sarah might help us."

Jonnie did a double take. "Really? You're trusting Sarah? Even after she betrayed us?"

"I think that a mother with nothing to lose will choose to save her daughter. I am betting that she's seen how the Global State will betray her—and more importantly, betray her daughter—when it suits them. Even if she's not on our side out of principle or ideology, I believe she's no longer on their side either. And that's good enough for me. The enemy of my enemy and all of that. Her love for

her daughter makes the Global State her enemy and that means we can be allies. She's an asset we can use."

And there it was. The same calculus that the Global State used. The same reduction of humans to motivated units. The difference was supposed to be that the Resistance valued people as human beings rather than assets. But perhaps there was no meaningful difference. Both systems saw people as instruments towards larger ends.

"So, 14.00 tomorrow?"

"Yes. When Sarah goes in for intake and her biometric credentials are uploaded, we'll activate the dead drop. She'll have thirty seconds to interact with the communication channel before her Psycho-Eval begins. Her choice whether or not to use it will determine the next steps."

Jonnie turned back to a blueprint of the Highbury facility. Three stories of reinforced concrete. Eight security checkpoints. Motion sensors, biometric locks and monitoring equipment that would detect any non-standard neural activity. Rescue through force was impossible. Rescue through infiltration was impossible.

Unless Sarah opened the door from inside.

"If Sarah takes the dead drop, what happens?"

"She'll become the most dangerous person in that facility. She'll have access to all the facility's communications, but what she does with it is up to her. She'll be able to coordinate with other prisoners, identify who else is being questioned and, potentially, spark an internal uprising. Or she could stay silent and use what she learns to better manipulate her handlers and eventually find the leverage she needs to free herself and Mae. Or, as you said, she could try to curry favour by reporting it all."

"So we don't actually know what Sarah will do." The Merchant shook his head slowly. Jonnie picked at a hangnail. "I want to send her a message," he said finally. "Before the dead drop. Something that tells her—" He stopped, unsure what he wanted to communicate. That he forgave her? He wasn't sure that he did; not yet. That he loved her despite the betrayal? That was his problem to process, not her burden to carry. That he wanted her to fight, to resist, to try to extract Mae even if it meant risking herself?

"Why don't you tell her the Ghost remembers? Isn't that what Mae and her Oracle called you? She'll understand that," the Merchant suggested.

"Will she?"

"Probably, but meaning is often what we decide it means. The point is that she'll know it's from you."

Ahmed helped Jonnie send the transmission through secure channels. It was encrypted, bounced through multiple relays and constructed to look like nothing more than routine network maintenance. Three words inserted into a data-noise pattern that shouldn't even register to human consciousness:

Ghost remembers. Fight.

And then they waited.

A couple of hours later, they received a response:

Mae in medical wing, northeast, third floor. Guards rotate 14.30. Fernsby in cell 7. Reconstruction active, but paused for intake procedure. Suzanne in interrogation. Cooperative, requesting protection for family. I can disrupt motion sensors for ninety seconds if you authorise extraction. Confirm.

It felt like someone had punched him in the stomach. Suzanne was cooperating? Suzanne had family? Why had she never mentioned them? And then the rest of Sarah's message penetrated Jonnie's brain. Ninety seconds? How on earth did Sarah expect them to extract everyone in ninety seconds? They weren't even all in the same general location. Highbury was a huge facility with state-of-the-art biometric security and neural monitoring systems. Not to mention the armed guards crawling all over the place.

"It's impossible," Robyn said flatly, studying the facility's schematics.

"It's possible," the Merchant corrected. "Difficult, but possible. With the advantage of Sarah's disruption and the element of surprise, a small, well-trained team could do it. I'd say you have, maybe, a forty per cent chance of success."

"Oh wow! Those are brilliant odds!"

Jonnie shot Robyn a quelling look. "They're our friends. We have to try."

"I didn't say we wouldn't try," Robyn grumbled under her breath.

Jonnie suppressed a smile. Robyn often griped, but she was always the first one through the door, knives at the ready. And he was always right behind her. He squared his shoulders as he looked around at his friends. "Okay, so Sarah receives

the dead drop tomorrow at 14.00 and the guards change at 14.30. That's when our window opens. So we should be in place, ready to go before 14.00."

"Agreed. That will give us time to position extraction teams and establish a backup perimeter," the Merchant said.

"Okay, then let's get to work on the extraction plan," Jonnie agreed.

They prepared their weapons, memorised the facility's layout and studied guard rotation patterns. They mapped out every possible entry and exit point, and every possible escape route, and planned for the hundred different ways the extraction could go catastrophically wrong.

At 02.00, Jonnie called it quits and told everyone to get some sleep. They'd need to be sharp the next day. He didn't follow his own advice, though, tossing and turning as his mind raced from one disastrous outcome to the next. At 06.15, he gave up trying to sleep and went in search of coffee. They didn't have proper coffee beans down here, but they did have a stockpile of decent instant coffee, which was a significant improvement on the sludge the Global State expected you to drink.

He found Robyn at the communal kettle. "Couldn't sleep either, huh?" She shook her head. "You also thinking about everything that could possibly go wrong today?" He pulled a disposable cup from the top of the stack on the trestle table.

"Actually, I can't stop thinking about Suzanne."

Jonnie felt sick to his stomach all over again. "Yeah. That one cut deep. Did you know she had a family?" He spooned coffee granules into his cup and reached for the freshly-boiled kettle.

"Nah. I mean, she mentioned a sister once, but the way she spoke about her, I thought she'd passed. I didn't think she had any living family." Robyn handed him the sugar and he added three heaped teaspoons to the steaming cup. He needed the sugar boost. "I just I can't believe she'd betray us."

"Yeah." There was nothing else to say.

They found an unoccupied table where they could drink their coffee and continue prepping for the afternoon's mission. Gradually, the others joined them. There was a sombreness to the group this morning. Everyone knew what was at stake. They went over the schematics, the guard patrol schedules and the escape routes again, but they were as prepared as they could be. It would all come down

to Sarah. If she didn't disarm the security protocols, if her intel wasn't accurate, they would be dead the minute they walked into the facility.

At 11.30, Jonnie told the team to gear up—it would take them nearly two hours to make their way through the subterranean tunnels to an exit near the Highbury facility. As he zipped up his backpack, he looked at Robyn. "If this fails, if we don't come out—"

"Don't. Don't do the pre-death confession. If we die, we die. I'd rather not hear your regrets before we go in."

Fair enough. He put on the tactical gear the Merchant's people had assembled, checked his weapon one last time, and signalled to everyone to move out.

The Highbury facility's northeast exterior wall had a maintenance junction—one of those forgotten access points that existed because removing it would cost more than leaving it sealed. At exactly 14.30, Ahmed used salvaged tools to bypass the lock without triggering any alerts. The breach team squeezed through the door in quick succession.

Sarah had come through for them. Inside, the security protocols were in a shambles. Motion sensors were being triggered by non-existent movement in distant quadrants, sending guards in the wrong direction. Similarly, neural monitoring kept showing people where there were none. And biometric locks would unlock automatically to allow them entry whenever they needed it. But they only had ninety seconds before the system realised something was seriously wrong and reset itself.

They split up, moving fast and relying on Sarah's intel and the schematics they'd all memorised. Jonnie and Robyn headed to the medical wing on the third floor, while Ahmed and the two operatives the Merchant had lent them went in search of Fernsby.

Jonnie and Robyn found Mae in Room 314, under neural observation but not actively restrained, which was a stroke of luck. The faint glow of the monitors cast shifting shadows across her small face, highlighting eyes that seemed calm but held the weight of many futures. She looked smaller than Jonnie remembered, dwarfed by the neural monitors. She met his eyes without surprise, as if she'd been waiting. "The Ghost arrives," she said. "The Oracle said you would."

Fifty-five seconds remaining.

They unhooked her from the neural monitors and Jonnie picked her up to carry her. "Ahmed, we've got Mae. You?"

"We've got Fernsby. He's conscious and alert. Making our way to the exit now."

"Copy that. We're going for Sarah."

His comms crackled. Then a different voice spoke in his ear. "Jonnie?"

"Sarah? We're coming for you, hold on."

"No, don't! Get Mae out. Don't come for me. No time. You can't get to me—there's too much security."

"Sarah—"

"No! You promised you'd look after Mae. Please, Jonnie."

Jonnie exchanged an anguished look with Robyn. She was hearing this too.

"I'll get Mae out and then come back for you."

Sarah didn't respond. There was nothing to say. They both knew he wouldn't be coming back. They had forty seconds left.

They retraced their route, running as quickly as they could. They frequently had to duck into an empty room to avoid an unexpected guard as the corridors became increasingly frantic. It looked like the system might be coming back online sooner than they thought and the window Sarah created was closing quicker than expected.

Thirty seconds.

As they raced past a frosted window, Mae reached out and traced a quick, but intricate pattern in the condensation. It flickered faintly on a nearby terminal, unnoticed by the scrambling guards.

Fifteen seconds.

Emergency lights began activating. The window was collapsing. Armed guards were converging on their position.

Ten seconds.

They sprinted. Ahmed and one of the Merchant's operatives rounded a corner ahead of them, Fernsby between them. The other operative was right on their heels.

Five seconds.

They converged on the maintenance junction exit just as the neural sensors came fully back online. Laser fire from guards missed them by inches, hitting the

wall behind them with a shower of plaster. It might be designed to stun rather than kill, but it would still be lethal at close range.

Zero seconds.

They piled through the exit and scrambled for the extraction point where the Resistance had a van waiting. The second they were all inside, the vehicle accelerated away—not even waiting for Jonnie to close the doors properly. He slammed them shut on a view of armed response teams boiling out of Highbury like angry ants.

For thirty seconds, Jonnie thought they were going to make it; thought they were in the clear.

Then the van's left side exploded.

It felt like a wrecking ball slammed into their vehicle. *Drone strike*, Jonnie thought as the van flipped up into the air. And then he had no time to think. He hit glass and then metal and then someone's leg and then more metal. When the motion finally stopped, Jonnie was pinned under twisted seating. His vision swam and his breath came in painful gasps. Something was digging painfully into his side.

Mae was above him somehow. She appeared unharmed, apart from a gash on her arm that looked shallow, but was bleeding profusely. She looked down at him, seeming strangely calm.

He turned his head to the left and immediately regretted it. A wave of dizziness washed over him. He had to blink to clear his vision. But he could now see that Robyn seemed fine. She was alert, with her knife in one hand and a gun in the other, scanning for targets. Fernsby was bleeding from a head wound, but appeared conscious. He couldn't see the others from his position.

The van's rear doors had buckled during the crash. Through the gap, Jonnie could see moving shadows. *Armed response teams*, he thought absently.

"North tunnel junction," one of the Merchant's operatives was saying into comms. "Transport's damaged. Switch to foot extraction. Three minutes to secure position."

"Let's get this off of you, mate." Fernsby and Ahmed were tugging the twisted seating off his legs. Then he felt hands under his armpits as someone else lifted him up. His legs buckled under his weight when he tried to stand, so Fernsby and

Ahmed half-supported and half-dragged him. Mae and Robyn were ahead of them. It looked like Mae was showing Robyn where to go.

Shots were coming from behind them. *Soldiers*, his brain supplied. The Merchant's operatives must be behind them, returning fire. He tried to turn his head to look, but another wave of dizziness washed over him, almost causing him to fall.

"Careful, mate," Ahmed said, catching Jonnie's slumping body and adjusting his arm to get a better grip. "Almost there."

Robyn turned, raised her gun and provided covering fire. Behind the shield of her body, Jonnie saw Mae slip down into a manhole. A few seconds later, they reached the same maintenance shaft access point. "I'll go first," Fernsby said even as he began climbing down the short ladder. "I can help Jonnie if he slips."

They descended into the darkness as quickly as they dared. Up above, Robyn and the operatives continued to provide cover until Jonnie, Ahmed and Fernsby had cleared the ladder. Then they followed one by one, still laying down cover fire, but more cautiously in the enclosed space. Behind them, pursuit continued, but warily. The guards clearly had orders not to follow too far into the unmonitored subterranean infrastructure. Down here, they were blind without specialised equipment.

The maintenance shaft led to an access tunnel, which led to a storm drain. A few hundred metres down the storm drain, they climbed up another ladder into another access tunnel, which led to an older-looking tunnel, purpose unknown. After that, Jonnie lost track. They stopped running when they reached a pre-1900 brick and stone tunnel and they knew they were safely out of the Global State's reach—at least for the moment.

Fernsby helped Jonnie slide to the ground. "I didn't get a chance to say thank you back there, right? For coming back for me."

"No man left behind," Jonnie said, accepting a bottle of water from Ahmed.

Robyn came over with the first aid kit. "You don't look too good. I think you've got a concussion." She fished a small torch out of her bag, grabbed Jonnie's chin to hold his head steady and then shone the light briefly into his eyes. "Follow my finger," she instructed, holding her forefinger up and moving it slowly back and forth in front of his eyes. "Yeah, pretty sure your brain got scrambled. We need to

watch that. Head hurting?" she asked. Jonnie nodded and immediately winced. Robyn scratched around in the first aid kit and then handed him a couple of tablets. "Paracetamol," she said at his questioning look. "Okay, I've done all I can for now, so I'll leave you to these guys. You got him?" she asked Ahmed and Fernsby and received replies in the affirmative.

Robyn cleaned and bandaged Fernsby's head wound and then beckoned Mae over so she could take care of the cut on her arm. The girl didn't flinch when Robyn wiped the cut with antiseptic. Instead, she watched Jonnie with something that might have been triumph— if seven-year-olds could be triumphant.

"The Oracle said the Ghost would walk and return changed," Mae said. "The Oracle was right."

"The Oracle seems to know a lot of things," Jonnie replied. Was he slurring his words? He was tired. "Mae, is the Oracle real?" Mae scrunched up her forehead, looking confused. Of course, the Oracle was real to her. Jonnie tried again. "I mean, is it really prophecy? Does it really tell the future? Is it a special gift, or is it something else?"

Mae tilted her head, considering. Then her eyes unfocused, almost like she was seeing something none of them were seeing, or talking to something in her head. "It's prophecy, if you believe it is. Or, if you distrust that, it's a machine. The Oracle doesn't care what you call it, or even if you believe in it; it just shows what is and what can be."

And maybe that was the most honest assessment they could hope for. The Oracle—whether it was actual precognition, neural implant surveillance, artificial intelligence prediction, or all three simultaneously—existed at the threshold between truth and interpretation. You could believe in it or doubt it. Both were valid responses.

"Do you know what will happen to your mother?" Jonnie asked.

Sarah had sacrificed her own freedom for Mae's—and Fernsby's. She knew that by opening the window for Mae and Fernsby's rescue, she would trip security protocols that would result in a lockdown she couldn't escape. She was all but guaranteeing a complete mindwipe so her daughter could escape.

Mae's certainty flickered for the first time. "The Oracle doesn't see that far. It says Mummy made choices." She looked Jonnie in the eye. "Mummy chose me."

Jonnie fought back tears. "Yes, she did. She chose you every time."

Epilogue

SIX WEEKS LATER

The broadcast had reached twelve million people before being suppressed—either through the initial broadcast, or through pirated copies posted to social media and the dark web. After that, knowledge of Project Blue Beam spread by word of mouth. The Global State now estimated that approximately eight to twelve per cent of the population harboured moderate to severe doubts about the official narrative—a three hundred per cent increase from their pre-broadcast baseline.

Measured against the cost, it remained a horrifying trade-off.

The Resistance continued to grow. It now operated from twenty confirmed locations across London and extended into Birmingham, Manchester and Edinburgh.

Brian continued collating archive work from a safe location in London, maintaining the mesh networks that distributed the archived evidence to cells across Britain.

Robyn remained unchanged—knives always sharp, always ready to have Jonnie's back. Perhaps the only thing that had changed was a truce, of a sort, between her and Fernsby. They would never be the best of friends, but they had developed a mutual respect that allowed them to work together training Resistance recruits and passing on their ops and weapons expertise.

Ahmed had recovered most of his pre-Psycho-Eval cognitive function, although his memory remained fragmented. His personality also had subtle differences—the mark of neural reconstruction that had been halted mid-procedure. But he was grateful to be useful again and mostly functional. He treated the differences in his

pre- and post-Psycho-Eval states as a living reminder not of what he'd lost, but of what he *could* have lost.

Suzanne remained detained at Highbury, having provided little intelligence of value to her captors. It was enough, however, to keep her out of the Psycho-Eval chair and grant her and her family members a measure of protection. She'd been assigned an administrative role within the Global State's intelligence apparatus. It still pained Jonnie that she'd chosen collaboration rather than the Resistance, but he had to concede that she'd made the choices she felt were necessary to keep herself and others alive.

Sarah's status remained classified. There was no confirmation of whether or not she'd completed a Psycho-Eval—no mention of her in any communications they intercepted whatsoever. It didn't bode well. If it wasn't for the fact that they could still find a record of her name, Jonnie would've suspected she'd been disappeared. As it was, the lack of information suggested she'd been subjected to a complete mindwipe. To all intents and purposes, Sarah Sallow was gone.

Mae was doing well, all things considered. She still drew, although her visions had become less frequent and less prophetic. Without access to surveillance feeds and neural interfaces, her Oracle had limited bandwidth. She still occasionally offered cryptic observations that might have been precognition, or might just have been the phantasms of a child's imagination. She'd become more like a typical seven-year-old girl, and for that, Jonnie was grateful.

Jonnie had been offered a leadership position within the Resistance, but he'd declined. He needed to stay out of visibility and capture so he could raise Mae. Instead, he worked as a technical specialist, helping maintain the autonomous networks that allowed the scattered cells to operate without a central command structure.

He spent time with Mae, taking care of her as he had promised, helping her process her Oracle experiences. He also spent time with his other friends—particularly Ahmed, whose damaged mind was slowly healing, and Robyn, who still used violence the way other people used prayer.

And he spent a lot of time studying the global surveillance networks, trying to understand the patterns. He was still haunted by that moment when the system had acknowledged his existence and their conflict and had, in that

acknowledgement, revealed that it had a better understanding of humanity than they had believed. The machine saw all; the machine knew all. The machine didn't hate them or seek revenge—it simply corrected, moving them back into what it perceived as proper functionality.

But something had changed with the broadcast. It had sown doubt, which then began spreading like a virus through networks designed to handle only certainty.

The surveillance state was still winning. It still controlled infrastructure and resources. It still had the means to force compliance. The algorithm continued to learn, to adapt, to predict. But it was no longer certain of victory.

London continued under the control of the Global State. Citizens moved through their choreographed routines, compliant and monitored. But somewhere in that compliance, in the small gaps between surveillance nodes, in the darkness between screens and sensors, resistance was growing.

And the Resistance was growing. Not in a dramatic way that would end in a spectacular victory, but more of a slow growth. It spread through quiet conversation, encrypted messages and small acts of non-compliance that accumulated to undermine the system. It was like the slow filling of a dam, drop by drop, until millions of drops later, that one extra drop causes the dam to burst.

It wouldn't be fast. Victory wouldn't be clean or complete. But it would be human. And that, perhaps, was enough.

* * *

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Author's Note

What He Saw started when I couldn't shake the nightmare of China and it's authoritarian regime: a world where the screens we trust turn against us, and when one hundred and ninety-three world leaders all fell into lockstep, agreeing to implement the United Nations Agenda 2030—weaponising AI against us, installing facial recognition everywhere, introducing Digital ID and carbon credits to control every breath. As a thriller writer with 10 books behind me, I've always chased psychological tension—but this dystopia felt too real. With reduction of free speech on social media, and algorithms silencing any real dissent... it's the chilling foundation for Jonnie's fight.

Thank you for plunging into the tunnels with him, enduring the betrayals, and questioning everything. If his awakening stirred you, your review on Amazon helps indie voices like mine break through the noise.

Afterword

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I enjoy connecting with readers worldwide on my social media platforms. Go to my website to find my social media links and say hello! www.karenbradyauthor.com.

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